

The Atlantic

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the ISIS Trap p.15

Can America Put Itself Back Together?

A three-year, 54,000-mile journey
reveals surprising sources of strength.

By James Fallows



+

**Clash of the
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Photograph by Adam Voorhes

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THE CONVERSATION

RESPONSES & REVERBERATIONS

The Silicon Valley Suicides

In the December cover story, Hanna Rosin asked why so many kids in Palo Alto have taken their own lives.



The cover article on the spate of teen suicides in Palo Alto provides an up-front discussion of the issue and helps address the harmful stigma surrounding mental illness and suicide. Suicide has important biological underpinnings and is amenable to interventions. Effective treatment for depression can work wonders too. Our communities and families need to talk about mental illness and suicidal thoughts openly and matter-of-factly, just like we would about any other medical condition. We need to encourage those who are suffering and their families to seek treatment, and emphasize that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. Only in this way will we stem the tide.

Maria A. Oquendo, M.D.
PRESIDENT-ELECT, AMERICAN
PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION
ARLINGTON, VA.

The Silicon Valley suicides are a cause for mourning, and we should make every effort to understand what is

happening and why. Hanna Rosin touches on the possible influences of race, poverty, parenting, and school expectations in seeking explanations for the problem. But West Coast secular thinking has now so infected sociological study that it does not seem relevant to Rosin to seek any correlation between spiritual values and practices and the presence or absence of suicide trends. This is like studying disease data without factoring in germ theory.

Don Kammerdiener
RICHMOND, VA.

As student journalists, we are mindful of the national guidelines on suicide reporting outlined by the National Institute of Mental Health. These recommendations ... are imperative in reducing the media coverage's effect on increasing copycat suicides. Rosin clearly violates these guidelines, which caution against descriptive accounts of the act of suicide itself and the publication of the contents of a suicide note.

She vividly depicts a rushing train, which is especially triggering, as well as Cameron Lee's parents reading his suicide note ...

Furthermore, Rosin neglects to mention in detail the efforts that our community has made. Though she briefly mentions the recent *Unmasked* documentary and Gunn [High School]'s "A Titan Is ..." project, there are many other initiatives working to improve school climate and address the stigma surrounding mental health. These efforts include the Sources of Strength peer-mentoring program at [Palo Alto High] and Gunn, the "Changing the Narrative" series in Gunn's *Oracle*, and the Save the 2008 campaign.

EXCERPT FROM AN EDITORIAL IN
PALO ALTO HIGH SCHOOL'S
VERDE MAGAZINE

I was the vice president of ROCK (Reach Out, Care, Know), a suicide-prevention club. I helped my friends who were struggling with depression and suicidal ideation. In

eighth grade, one of my best friends attempted suicide. She had, and still has, bipolar disorder and depression.

The main "why" of suicide is mental illness. Stress can heighten mental illness and cause depression, but there is no evidence showing that stress is what led to any of these suicides.

I agree that we have a stress problem at Gunn. We should address mindfulness on campus. We should address the stigmatization of mental illness. We should be offered multiple paths to success from the very beginning of elementary school, as well as different views on what success is. Rosin interviewed me for this article, and she completely disregarded everything I had to say that wasn't "Gunn is known as the suicide school in the middle-school communities."

There are kids who are pushed along by their parents and have their whole lives planned out for them. This happens everywhere across the country. But publicizing

this issue using the suicides in my hometown, where there is no connection between this and the kids who committed suicide, is just painful and harmful to a group of people trying to heal.

I do not have “Stockholm syndrome” from this. It is not embarrassing that we have had so many suicides here. We are sensitive about being interviewed, because our voices have not been heard and apparently continue to not be heard.

I didn’t love high school. I am so glad to be out of Palo Alto and with people who are passionate about what I’m passionate about. But when Rosin characterizes the people I spent four years with, crying on the quad with, as soulless zombies, I take issue with that.

Allyna Mota Melville
GUNN CLASS OF 2015
PALO ALTO, CALIF.

Hanna Rosin’s article posed this question: “Why are so many kids with bright prospects killing themselves in Palo Alto?” This question was representative of the insensitivity with which Ms. Rosin approached this topic.

Ms. Rosin, I agree with you that the extreme pressure of Palo Alto schools most certainly plays a significant role in “kids killing themselves.” While you underestimated the role of mental illness in your article, I understand why you did so. You were trying to find the anomaly in Palo Alto that causes these awful events, and while mental illness (and the stigma surrounding it) is absolutely part of the problem, stress in Palo Alto schools is the thing that stands out the most.

I did not know either of the kids who killed themselves. However, I—unlike you—was there to witness what happened on campus both of those awful days. I saw the looks on everyone’s faces as the morning went on, and felt the awful knot in my stomach telling me that something had gone terribly, terribly wrong. I listened as my teachers read aloud the robot-like school statements telling us what had happened. I like to think that our campus wears a mask of happy perfection most days, but on those days that mask crumbled. Kids all around me collapsed, crying and shaking with the knowledge that nothing would ever be the same. Our entire campus descended into an uncertain silence, broken only by the cries of those who had lost the most. Counselors and teachers hovered around us, but as much training as they had received and as much as they knew about suicide, I could tell that they, too, knew there was nothing they could do.

That was the worst part, Ms. Rosin. There was nothing I or the teachers or the counselors or the parents could do to make it better. Because it could not be ignored and it could not be resolved and it most certainly was not going to be okay.

Ms. Rosin, your article has reopened our barely healed wounds. Your article ends with this line: “They’re kids, so they can still forget.” My criticism of this line is twofold. First, calling us “kids” is patronizing, and belittles our thoughts and feelings. Even if at that time we weren’t adults by conventional standards, I can assure you that we certainly all grew up on those days. Second, even I, a “kid” unrelated to either of

those who committed suicide, remember the events of those days. And I can assure you, those days will always be imprinted on my mind and on the minds of my peers. So please, Ms. Rosin, do not claim we are lucky that we have young minds that can rebound from trauma.

Megan Valencia
PALO ALTO HIGH CLASS OF 2015
PALO ALTO, CALIF.

Like many others, I read “The Silicon Valley Suicides” in this month’s *Atlantic* and it led me to reflect on my own experience at Palo Alto High School.

The pressure to succeed in high school is all too familiar to me. I distinctly remember being a freshman in high school, overwhelmed by the belief that my GPA over the next four years would make or break my life. My daily thought process was that every homework assignment, every project, every test could be the difference. The difference between a great college and a mediocre

college. The difference between success and failure. The difference between happiness and misery.

I remember not being able to sleep well on Sunday nights, waking up covered in sweat from nightmares that I had just failed a test. I dreaded Sundays because it meant I just finished my weekend basketball tournament—my precious outlet from academics—and now faced a whole week of immense pressure at school. I felt the pressure coming from all around me—my parents, my peers, and worst of all, myself. I felt that I had one shot at high school and that my GPA, SAT score, and college applications were the only barometers of my success ...

As each year of high school passed by, I realized that even though there was pressure to be great, I had to make a personal choice not to define myself by my success and accomplishments. I learned through my brother, my pastor, and my friends that my

BAROMETER

The most-read magazine stories from 2015 on TheAtlantic.com

1

What ISIS Really Wants

Graeme Wood (March)

2

The Coddling of the American Mind

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (September)

3

The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration

Ta-Nehisi Coates (October)

4

The False Gospel of Alcoholics Anonymous

Gabrielle Glaser (April)

5

Is It Time for the Jews to Leave Europe?

Jeffrey Goldberg (April)

identity and my worth were in more than my grades. Growing up my parents always said, “Do your best and trust God with the results.” When I learned to truly understand what that meant, it was like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

Separating myself from my results is not an easy lesson and I’ve had to relearn this in every stage of my life. The world will always need you to accomplish more, do more, succeed more. After I got into Harvard there was the pressure to get good grades and stand out at Harvard. After Linsanity there was the pressure to have great performances every night, to become an All-Star, to win championships. I still dream big and give my all in everything I do, but I know that success and failure are both fleeting.

When I was a freshman at Palo Alto High, a classmate who sat next to me committed suicide. I remember having difficulty registering what had happened. A year later, a friend committed suicide. I saw up close the pain and devastation of their loved ones and in my community. I realized then that there are so many burdens we don’t see the people around us carrying. I told myself that I would try to be more sensitive and open to other people’s struggles.

We may not have the answers to how to completely solve these issues, but we can take more time to really listen to each other, to reach out and have compassion for one another. I don’t have any great insight and I don’t know exactly what it’s like to be a high-school student today. I

do know that I’m proud to be from Palo Alto, a resilient community that I see striving to learn how to better support and care for each other. I hope that my personal experience can remind someone else that they are worth so much more than their accomplishments.

Jeremy Lin
POINT GUARD,
NBA’S CHARLOTTE HORNETS
PALO ALTO HIGH CLASS OF 2006
EXCERPT FROM A FACEBOOK POST

I am an Asian Indian parent and my two children graduated from Gunn recently. As immigrant parents, we worked very, very hard to give our children an education we did not have: one that emphasized the joy of learning (with less emphasis on grades and tests), creativity, and balance between school and outside activities, and redefined what success means. I gave up a Silicon Valley career to be a full-time mom, to listen to my children and support their passion, to be there for them, and to help this community. I have lived in many communities, and I have found Palo Alto to be caring, honest, and open-minded.

I knew some of the children who took their lives on the train tracks. I know some of the parents whose children suffered depression, acknowledged it, and tried everything they could to find help. Every day I cross those train tracks and ask why. What could I have done? This is true of every parent here.

I agree with some of the issues Hanna Rosin raised. But something she did not address: Many teenagers in this country are depressed. These kids don’t know how to get help or cannot afford help. There is a stigma

THE BIG QUESTION

On *TheAtlantic.com*, readers answered January/February’s Big Question and voted on one another’s responses. Here are the top vote-getters.

Q: What Is the Greatest Collaboration of All Time?

5. The Wright brothers.

Orville and Wilbur showed the world how man could fly.
— *Graham Walker*

4. When the sperm “collaborates” with the egg in the fallopian tube.

Without this interaction, there’d be no other collaboration.
— *William S. Owen*

3. Ink and paper, because without it there wouldn’t have been the second-greatest collaboration of all

time: Calvin and Hobbes.

— *Katie Cross*

2. On the Western Front during World War I, **the Christmas Truce of 1914** was a temporary cease-fire self-imposed by German and British troops, illustrating man’s essential humanity at its finest.

— *Dan Fredricks*

1. **The Beatles’ Lennon-McCartney dyad** irreversibly changed popular music.
— *Alessandro Columbu*

about mental health, and many of our health-care programs do not adequately cover mental illness. The college-admissions process and the high-school structure are not conducive to the mental-health needs of our young people. I am not convinced this is a Silicon Valley problem alone, or an Asian cultural problem, or a problem with our medical establishment.

All I know is that the factors contributing to these suicides are complex and that this community is addressing them. We are not afraid to be judged and we are not stuck between fear and denial. We have not waited for Rosin’s article to spur discussions, soul-searching, and conversations between many different ethnic and economic groups.

Lakshmi Sunder
PALO ALTO, CALIF.

Thank you for writing this, Ms. Rosin. I have two children who went to a public high school a few towns north of Palo Alto, and the news of these suicides—which comes all too frequently—haunts me, as I’m sure it does most other local parents. While the pressure at my kids’ school wasn’t quite as intense, our school, too, regularly sends graduates to Stanford, UC Berkeley, and UCLA, as well as Ivies and other selective schools.

I agree that affluence has a corrupting influence on parents’ expectations of their kids, but I also believe the blame lies very much at the feet of college admissions, including the ranking system of *U.S. News & World Report*, test prep for the SAT, and, yes, the fact that a third or more of the slots at some public colleges are given to out-of-state students, making

HOW CAN WE MAKE SENSE OF VAST AMOUNTS OF COMPLEX AIRLINE DATA WITH A MYRIAD OF VARIABLES, CRUNCHING 6 HOURS OF INTENSE CALCULATIONS INTO 1 MINUTE, SO THAT HIGHLY VALUED CUSTOMERS LIKE STEVE MURRAY OF BROOKLYN DON'T SPEND HOURS WAITING AT THE AIRPORT FOR A DELAYED FLIGHT THAT WILL EVENTUALLY BE CANCELED, WHEN HE COULD HAVE STAYED HOME CELEBRATING HIS DAUGHTER'S SEVENTH BIRTHDAY?
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the competition for spots akin to the admissions race at selective private colleges. And it's no wonder competition is so fierce: The cost of attending UCLA versus attending the University of Michigan, for example, is about *half* for a resident of California. There's strong motivation to put pressure on one's kid when the total four-year bill is \$100,000 versus \$200,000 for an out-of-state public school, or even more for a private college.

All that said, the bottom line is that parents have to get real. Gunn is a toxic environment. Period. I don't care how "good" the school is; it can't be all that great if 42 kids are hospitalized or treated for suicidal ideation.

Put limits on your kids' activities. Don't allow them to take more than one or two Advanced Placement classes in a given year. If they are up until 2 a.m. every night doing homework, something is amiss. You, Mom and Dad, can put the brakes on.

SALfin

THEATLANTIC.COM COMMENT

Colleges can do quite a bit to prevent teen suicides, and quite easily. How? By setting a minimum standard for admission (let's say a 3.5 GPA and an 1800 SAT score), and then using a lottery system to randomly select students from among all applicants who qualify.

There would be a lot less pressure on students to overachieve, since that would

do nothing to improve their chances of admission. And since there are so many high-quality students these days, universities would probably end up with classes that are just as strong as those admitted under the current system.

Matthew Warburg

LAKE FOREST PARK, WASH.

Hanna Rosin replies:

The Verde editorial mentions the guidelines on suicide reporting. I followed them faithfully. I left out many details I knew about the suicides and the suicide notes, and included a lengthy testimonial from someone who had attempted suicide and then learned to live a healthy life. Ultimately, though, the goal of those guidelines is not to keep reporting on suicides vague and hidden in the back pages of a newspaper. It's to keep kids safe and healthy. And in this case, part of that is getting people to really face the pressures on high-school kids, and how those pressures are making them miserable.

My aim was not to single out Palo Alto. I reported there because it's an example you can't ignore. But the scene is not all that different in Los Angeles or Houston or Washington, D.C., or any place where families have money and high expectations. In all these places, kids are being defined a little too much by their achievements.

Whose fault is it? That's hard to say. What's interesting about Jeremy Lin's Facebook post is that he can't locate a single source for the crushing pressure he felt—it came from parents,

peers, "and worst of all, myself" he writes. It was, in other words, just there, preloaded. If I hope to accomplish anything with this article, it's to get people to pause and acknowledge that: The pressure is just there, and it doesn't matter anymore whose fault it is.

How to fix it? Someone pointed out to me that in eras past, there was usually a robust youth counterculture—hippies, antimaterialists, riot grrrls, grunge fans, punk rockers. Now it's hard to name one such group. Educators, mental-health experts, and parents might one day do their part to dial back the single-minded achievement culture, as the people in Palo Alto have already started to do. But, kids, I leave it to you.

De Blasio's Record

In December, Molly Ball profiled New York Mayor Bill de Blasio ("The Equalizer").

I enjoyed Molly Ball's de Blasio profile. However, it's not accurate to say that his administration has "stopped arresting people caught with small amounts of marijuana." In fact, there were more than 17,300 arrests for marijuana possession in New York in 2015.

Ted Hamm, Ph.D.

CHAIR, JOURNALISM AND
NEW-MEDIA STUDIES,
ST. JOSEPH'S COLLEGE NEW YORK
BROOKLYN, N.Y.

Molly Ball replies:

The phrase small amounts is key here. In November 2014, the NYPD adopted a policy of

issuing summonses to people whose only offense was being caught with less than 25 grams of pot, rather than arresting them. Many advocates claim that such arrests are still happening, but these claims lack definitive evidence. Or they say officers add a spurious second charge, such as "burning marijuana," in order to fit the arrest criteria.

In any case, overall marijuana-possession arrests have declined dramatically since the policy took effect—there were more than 27,000 in 2014—and summonses have risen. But Hamm's complaint fits neatly with the theme of the article: de Blasio's inability to please some of the very activists you might expect to applaud his policies.

Corrections

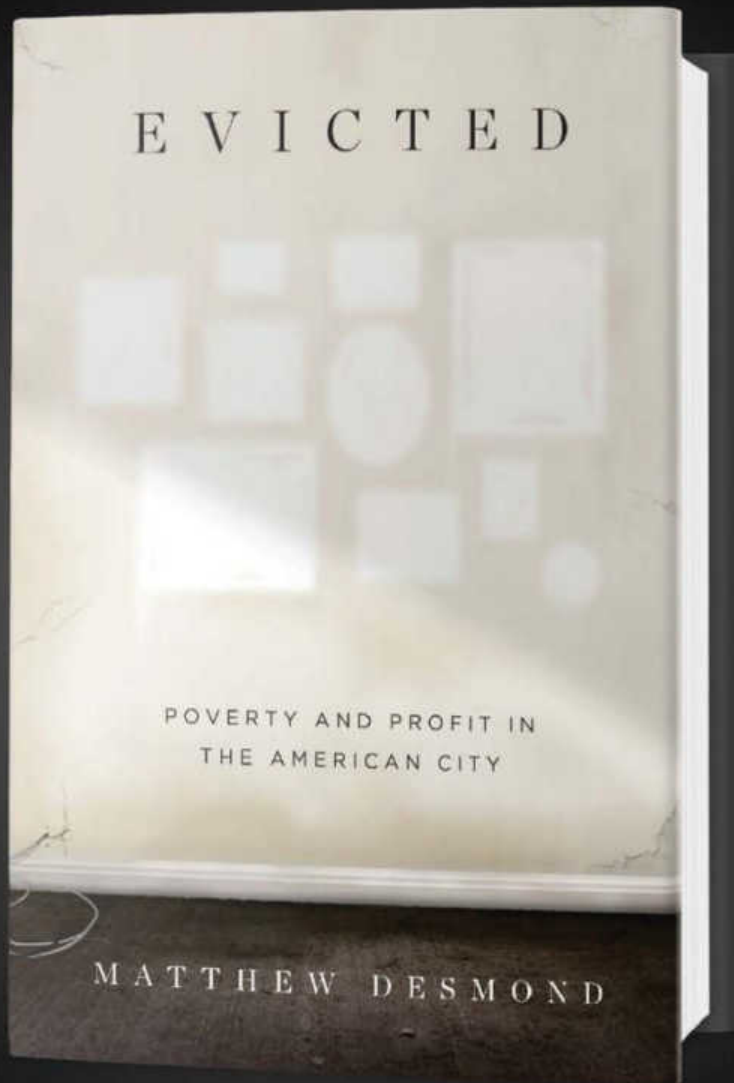
Molly Ball's "The Equalizer" (December) referred to the "Democratic heritage of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Fiorello La Guardia." Although he was an ally of FDR's, La Guardia was a Republican.

In "The Double Life of John le Carré" (James Parker, December), James Jesus Angleton was identified as the head of the CIA. Angleton never led the agency, though he would go on to become the head of counterintelligence.

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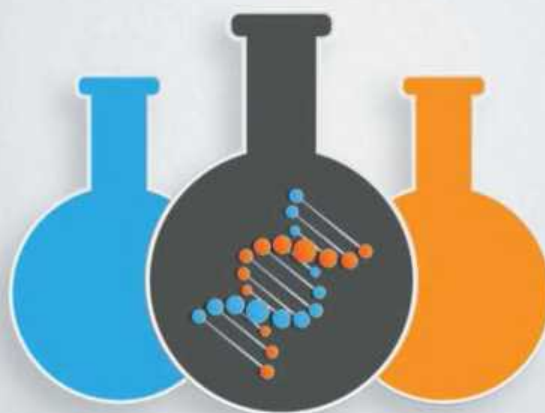
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DISPATCHES

IDEAS & PROVOCATIONS

March 2016

"Hopeful squires [in China] have made offerings like a bouquet of meat ... and a declaration of love composed with 1,001 hot dogs."
— Robert Foyle Hunwick, p. 17

• FOREIGN POLICY

The Terror Trap

Presidential candidates claim that attacking ISIS will make Americans safer. The opposite is true.

BY PETER BEINART

FOR CLOSE TO A DECADE, the trauma of the Iraq War left Americans wary of launching new wars in the Middle East. That caution is largely gone. Most of the leading presidential candidates demand that the United States escalate its air war in Iraq and Syria, send additional Special Forces, or enforce a buffer zone, which the head of Central Command, General Lloyd Austin, has said would require deploying U.S. ground troops. Most Americans now favor doing just that.

The primary justification for this new hawkishness is stopping the Islamic State, or ISIS, from striking the United States. Which is ironic, because at least in the short term, America's intervention will likely spark more terrorism against the United States, thus fueling demands for yet greater military action. After a period of relative restraint, the United States is heading back into the terror trap.

To understand how this trap works,



it's worth remembering that during the Cold War, the United States had relatively few troops in the Arab and Muslim world. When Ronald Reagan was elected president, Central Command, which oversees U.S. military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, did not even exist. All of this changed in 1990, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and President George H. W. Bush dispatched 700,000 troops to expel him and defend Saudi Arabia. After the war was won, thousands stayed to deter Saddam, and to enforce no-fly zones over Iraq.

Before the Gulf War, the Saudi native Osama bin Laden and his associates had focused on supporting the mujahideen, who were fighting to repel the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. But after the U.S.S.R.'s withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, al-Qaeda turned its attention to the United States, and in particular to America's military presence in Saudi Arabia. In 1992, al-Qaeda issued a fatwa calling for attacks on American troops in the Middle East. After the United States intervened in Somalia later that year, Somali rebels allegedly trained by al-Qaeda shot

down two Black Hawk helicopters. In 1995, al-Qaeda operatives took credit for bombing a joint U.S.-Saudi military facility in Riyadh. And in 1996, a truck bomb devastated a building housing U.S. Air Force personnel in the Saudi city of Dhahran. (Although Saudi Hezbollah carried out the attack, the 9/11 Commission noted “signs that al-Qaeda played some role.”) That same year, another al-Qaeda fatwa declared, “The latest and the greatest of these [Western] aggressions ... is the occupation of the land of the two Holy Places”: Saudi Arabia. On August 7, 1998, the eighth anniversary of the beginning of that “occupation,” al-Qaeda bombed America’s embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

The fact that al-Qaeda justified its attacks as a response to American “occupation” makes them no less reprehensible, of course. And al-Qaeda might well have struck American targets even had the U.S. not stationed troops on Saudi soil. After all, as a global superpower, the United States was involved militarily all across the world in ways al-Qaeda interpreted as oppressive to Muslims.

Still, it’s no coincidence that bin Laden and company shifted their focus away from the U.S.S.R. after Soviet troops left Afghanistan and toward the United States after American troops entered Saudi Arabia. Key advisers to George W. Bush recognized this. After U.S. forces overthrew Saddam in 2003, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz said one of the benefits “that has gone by almost unnoticed—but it’s huge—is that by complete mutual agreement between the U.S. and the Saudi government we can now remove almost all of our forces from Saudi Arabia.” The United States, he reasoned, had thus eliminated “a huge recruiting device for al-Qaeda.”

The problem was that to remove thousands of troops from Saudi Arabia, the United States sent more than 100,000 to invade and occupy Iraq. A dramatic surge in terrorist attacks against American and allied forces ensued. As Robert Pape, the director of the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism at the University of Chicago, has enumerated, the

world witnessed 343 suicide attacks from 1980 to 2003, about 10 percent of them against America and its allies. From 2004 to 2010, by contrast, there were more than 2,400 such attacks worldwide, more than 90 percent of them against American and coalition forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Many of those attacks were orchestrated by al-Qaeda’s Iraqi affiliate, which in 2006 established the Islamic State of Iraq. After weakening in 2007 and 2008 (when the U.S. paid Sunni tribal leaders to fight jihadists), the Islamic State strengthened again as the Obama administration’s inattention allowed Iraq’s Shia prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, to intensify his persecution of Sunnis. Then, after Syrians rebelled against Bashar al-Assad, the Islamic State expanded across Iraq’s western border into Syria, later renaming itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Significantly, when the last American troops left Iraq, in December 2011, ISIS did not follow them home. “In its various incarnations,” notes Daniel Byman, a counterterrorism expert who is a professor at Georgetown, the Islamic State “focused first and foremost on its immediate theater of operations.” Although ISIS was happy if people inspired by its message struck Western targets, it made little effort to orchestrate such attacks. Research fellows at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment detected only four ISIS-related plots in the West from January 2011 to May 2014.

But beginning in the fall of 2014, the number of ISIS-related plots in the West spiked. The Norwegian researchers counted 26 from July 2014 to June 2015 alone. What explains the rise? The most plausible explanation is that the Islamic State started targeting Western countries because they had started targeting it. In August 2014, the United States began bombing ISIS targets to protect the Yazidi religious sect in northern Iraq, which ISIS was threatening with extermination. France joined the air

campaign the following month. Since then, ISIS seems to have moved from merely inspiring attacks against the West to actively planning them. November’s attacks in Paris, writes Byman, were the “first time that ISIS has devoted significant resources to a mass-casualty attack in Europe.” Afterward, ISIS released a video warning the people of France: “As long as you keep bombing you will not find peace.”

In the wake of the Paris attacks, the Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio declared that the reason ISIS targets the West is “because we have freedom of speech, because we have diversity in our religious beliefs ... because we’re a tolerant society.” Yet only weeks earlier, ISIS had downed a Russian airliner over the Sinai, thus targeting the distinctly intolerant regime of Vladimir Putin. The Islamic State’s justification for that attack was identical to the one it gave for its attack on France: It was bombing Russia because Russia had bombed it.

All of which suggests that the more America intensifies its war against ISIS, the more ISIS will try to strike Americans. And the more terrorism ISIS man-

ages to carry out, the more fiercely America will escalate its air attacks, thus creating the civilian casualties that, according to the International Crisis Group’s Noah Bonsey, “tremendously help the narrative of a jihadi group like the Islamic State.” If the pub-

lic reaction to Paris and the December attack in San Bernardino is any guide, continued jihadist terrorism will also lead to a rising demand for American ground troops. That, argues the French ISIS expert Jean-Pierre Filiu, would be the worst trap America could fall into, because ISIS wants to cast itself as the Islamic world’s defender against a new crusader invasion.

DESPITE THESE DANGERS, there is a case for attacking ISIS. Part of it is humanitarian: Millions of people

The Islamic State was bombing Russia because Russia had bombed it.

now live in a caliphate in which many women cannot leave their homes unless accompanied by a man, and religious minorities can be sold as slaves. Allowing ISIS to expand, and potentially threaten Jordan or Saudi Arabia, would produce misery on an epic scale, intensify the refugee crisis already roiling Europe, and destroy America's reputation as the underwriter of Middle Eastern order.

But the war isn't being sold on these grounds. The presidential candidates are not telling Americans that a greater short-term terrorist threat is the price they must pay to liberate oppressed Arabs, protect friendly regimes, and prevent a greater danger down the road. Instead, candidates are promising, at least implicitly, that if America intensifies its war, the terrorist threat will decrease.

What happens when they're proved wrong? In a political environment where candidates won't admit that ISIS attacks are partly a response, albeit a monstrous one, to the United States' own use of force, further attacks will leave Americans even more bewildered and terrified than they are now. Some will gravitate to politicians who promise that with greater force, including ground troops, they can deliver a decisive military victory. Other Americans, desperate for a quick fix, will support further assaults on the rights of Muslims in the United States. Both impulses will help the Islamic State. And America will slide deeper into the terror trap.

The core problem is that most politicians are still selling war on the cheap. They won't admit that, no matter how convinced Americans may be of their good intentions, the violence the U.S. inflicts overseas will lead others to try to do violence to it. The more fervently the U.S. tries to kill ISIS supporters, the more fervently they will try to kill Americans. And in today's interconnected world, they will have more opportunities to strike than ever before.

Wars, even necessary ones, are usually costly for both sides. If the men and women running for president won't admit that, they shouldn't be demanding war at all. **A**



BIG IN ... CHINA

IMMODEST PROPOSALS

NOTHING says *Marry me!* like 99 iPhones—except, perhaps, 4,500 diapers. Or 99,999 chilies. These are some of the unusual tokens of love that prospective grooms have been flourishing in one of the world's toughest marriage markets.

One Guangzhou businessman arranged a fleet of luxury cars in the shape of a heart before popping the question. A wealthy suitor in Linyi felt that nothing less than a convoy of expensive vehicles, including two Ford Raptors and a Lamborghini Gallardo with a giant teddy bear strapped to its rear, would do for his girlfriend. The immodest proposal is not just a rich man's game, though: Hopeful squires of humbler tastes have made offerings like a bouquet of meat, a message spelled out with lychees, and a declaration of love composed with 1,001 hot dogs.

China has little tradition of creative proposals, in part because, into the 20th century, most marriages were arranged.

Throughout much of the second half of the century, moreover, the government discouraged elaborate weddings. Even now, public displays of affection are frowned upon by the older generations—hence the novelty of conspicuous proposals, which in many cases go viral on social media and sometimes even make the nightly news. The craze reflects a tendency among the younger generation toward flamboyant gestures, particularly romantic ones—but it's also symptomatic of just how high the stakes have become for the modern Chinese marriage.

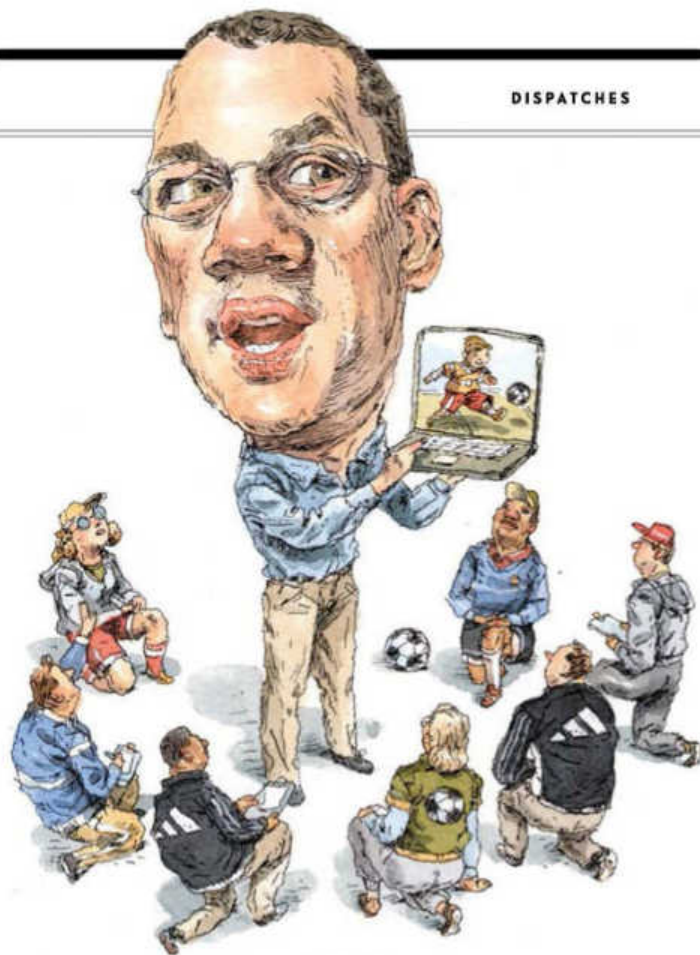
For many men, permanent bachelorhood is not a hypothetical fear, but a real danger. Chinese parents have long prized male heirs, and the one-child policy, recently abolished after 35 years, led many parents to abort female fetuses. According to one estimate, the country will by 2020 have at least 24 million “surplus” men ages 20 to 45. With competition for

A man from Wuhan sculpted his girlfriend's likeness in sand before proposing to her.

brides fierce, plenty of young people approach marriage as a kind of business deal, and assess their partner's credentials accordingly. Men must typically bring a home and financial security (and in many cases a car) to the table; women are encouraged by their families to practice hypergamy—that is, to marry up. Marital rivalry has already caused rural “bride prices” (essentially, reverse dowries paid to brides' parents) to surge; an extravagant proposal is now one more way for a prospective groom to enhance his desirability and status.

Of course, the high-pressure sell does not always succeed. One suitor in Qingdao set himself on fire after a car filled with expensive gifts failed to win over his beloved. And the Guangzhou man who felt his marriageability would best be demonstrated via an offer of 99 iPhones was ultimately rejected. Perhaps his girlfriend feared that someone who had spent so much on gadgets doomed to rapid obsolescence would not, himself, prove a shrewd investment.

— Robert Foyle Hunwick



Can This Man Save U.S. Soccer?

An expert teacher's efforts to rescue the sport from mediocrity, by starting with its coaches

BY AMANDA RIPLEY

Americans perform about as unimpressively in soccer as they do in education.

In both cases, the United States has suffered from a lack of focus and rigor, despite significant investments. More than 4 million kids are now registered in American youth-soccer leagues—more than in any other country—and yet the U.S. has never produced a Lionel Messi or a Cristiano Ronaldo. The men's national team still struggles to compete internationally. The women's team just won the World Cup, a shining accomplishment, but its players owe their success more to speed and athleticism than to technique; with powerhouses like Germany and France

finally getting serious about girls' sports, the American women will likely face stiffer competition in the years ahead.

American soccer officials are therefore humble in a way that other sports executives are not. "We need to improve, or in a few years, all those people we've gotten to pay attention [to soccer] will drift away," says Neil Buethe, the head of communications for the U.S. Soccer Federation, the sport's governing body in the United States. "A win only happens if our players get better, and our players only get better if the coaches get better."

This thinking has led U.S. Soccer officials to an unconventional idea: that a teaching expert they first read about in *The New York Times Magazine*—a man

with no professional soccer expertise—might help them advance the sport.

Among teachers, Doug Lemov is a sort of celebrity. He's spent years studying great educators, creating a taxonomy of techniques they use to manage common challenges (like defiant kids or tired kids or kids who need a lot of time to learn something that other kids learn quickly). Each year, he trains thousands of teachers around the world to use these tactics. He's also written a popular book called *Teach Like a Champion* and co-founded a chain of public charter schools in the Northeast.

When U.S. Soccer first reached out to Lemov, in 2010, the organization was already in the midst of a wholesale reformation. Four years earlier, soccer executives had toured the world, studying what other countries did differently. They had learned, among other things, that kids in other nations spent less time playing soccer games than did their American counterparts, and more time practicing. In response, the federation created its own youth league, called the U.S. Soccer Development Academy, modeled after international best practices. Top youth-soccer clubs could apply to join, if their coaches agreed to get licensed and follow a new model for training. The academy now comprises 152 soccer clubs across the U.S., which have produced more than 180 professional players.

Still, officials felt that more could be done. "For 20 years, we had focused almost exclusively on closing our global gap in the technical and tactical components of the game," says Dave Chesler, U.S. Soccer's director of coaching development. "In doing this, perhaps we had lost perspective on the quality of our delivery—aka the essential mechanics of teaching." Chesler, who had himself spent 15 years as a high-school chemistry and physics teacher before becoming a full-time soccer coach, realized after reading about Lemov in *The Times Magazine* that he had never transferred some of his own best teaching techniques to the field. He made immediate modifications to his coaching—for example, slowing down practices and focusing

more on watching the players, making sure each one demonstrated every step in a drill before moving on—and he sent copies of Lemov's book to his national staff. And then he asked Lemov for help.

Lemov was thrilled to hear from U.S. Soccer. But he was nervous, too, like a fan-boy unexpectedly pulled up onstage. He understood teaching, and it so happened that he loved soccer, but he didn't know whether his work would translate for coaches—or whether they would listen.

LEMOV STARTED PLAYING soccer when he was about 7 and still has the build of an athlete, tall and broad-shouldered. He was never a star, but he managed to win a spot on the Hamilton College soccer team through constant, solitary practice. It was a highly inefficient process, he now realizes, akin to learning French by sitting in a room, alone, with a French-English dictionary. Like many American soccer players, he was largely coached by people who lacked expert knowledge of the game. Once, at a friend's house during his senior year in college, he found a dusty videotape on defensive tactics, which demonstrated how best to bend your knees and angle your body when confronting an opponent. Lemov felt blindsided. The advice made sense, but he'd played defense for 14 years, and he'd never heard it. "All my life I'd been yelled at to 'defend,'" he says, "but no one had ever told me how to do it."

These days, he spends more time watching his own children on the soccer field than he does playing. He has seen them coached well, which fills him with gratitude. But he's also seen them coached poorly. One of his son's coaches sometimes yelled negative, perplexing things. "He would speak in these riddles: 'Where should you be?'" Not knowing the answer, the boy would stand still, afraid of making a mistake. Lemov found the scene heartbreaking and also familiar; he'd had the same feeling many times before, standing in the back of classrooms, watching well-intentioned teachers flounder.

This coach, Lemov knew, was generously donating his time and doing what he thought was right. But coaches, like

teachers, need practical training and meaningful feedback to do well. Teachers rarely get that support; coaches almost never do. And so, with Chesler's help, Lemov set about identifying specific tactics coaches could learn from great teachers—establishing rituals so drills start faster, say, or helping players get comfortable making mistakes in practice. So far, Lemov has trained about 200 coach educators, who in turn teach rank-and-file coaches around the country. He and U.S. Soccer have also created an online lesson that will be required viewing for tens of thousands of volunteer coaches seeking the federation's entry-level license.

This training will not look familiar to American adults who learned to play soccer at more traditional practices—where they ran laps to warm up and then waited in lines to take practice shots on goal. Little kids don't need highly structured warm-ups, according to U.S. Soccer; they arrive ready to move. And kids of all ages should be touching a ball as often as possible, without wasting any time waiting around. Throughout practice, players need productive, quick feedback in a culture that encourages them to take risks and make mistakes.

Soccer, it's sometimes said, is a player's game. The 22 people knocking a ball around a big field are bound by few rules. Predictable patterns rarely occur. As a result, coaches can't succeed by designing plays and ordering players to execute them, as they can in, say, football. Players have to make judgment calls in the moment, on their own.

This means that rote skills, while essential, are not in themselves adequate. "The thing that makes elite players is decision making," Lemov told me. "They need to integrate not just how to do something but whether, when, and why." He sees parallels to the difficulty many American students have solving problems independently. "If you give [American] kids a math problem and *tell* them how to solve it," he said, "they can usually do it. But if you give them a problem and it's not

clear how to solve it, they struggle."

Jürgen Klinsmann, a former soccer star in Germany who now coaches the U.S. men's team, has remarked that it's hard to get Americans to see that a soccer coach cannot be "the decision maker on the field," but should instead be a guide. "This is a very different approach," he told *USA Today*. "I tell them, 'No, you're not making the decision. The decision is made by the kid on the field.'" Outside the U.S., most soccer players learn to play independently very early on; from the day they can walk, they are kicking a ball every free moment. In the process, they gain both physical and mental dexterity. "That's not always [been] the case here," says Jared Micklos, the Development Academy's director. "We didn't have a lot of un-

structured play where kids could develop creativity. It was a lot of tournaments and pressure and sideline parents and trophies."

In the absence of back-alley pickup games, soccer players in the United States must develop their skills in

supervised practices. That's why high-quality coaching is so essential to nurturing world-class American players. "If we want better players, we need better coaches," Micklos told me. "In order to get better coaches, we gotta coach them."

ON THE FIRST truly cold night of the fall, a group of coaches from all over Virginia gathered inside a rec center in Arlington to learn from Lemov. The scene was noticeably different from his teacher trainings, where audiences tend to be disproportionately female and to clap a lot. The assembled coaches, most of them men, most of them wearing Adidas jackets, were a little less affirming, a bit more jocular. (One had written "God" on his name tag.) Still, Lemov addressed them with the same gentle intensity that he uses with teachers. "I appreciate the work that you do," he said, taking pains to make eye contact with each coach through his small, wire-frame glasses.

As he does with teachers, Lemov asked the coaches to write up sample

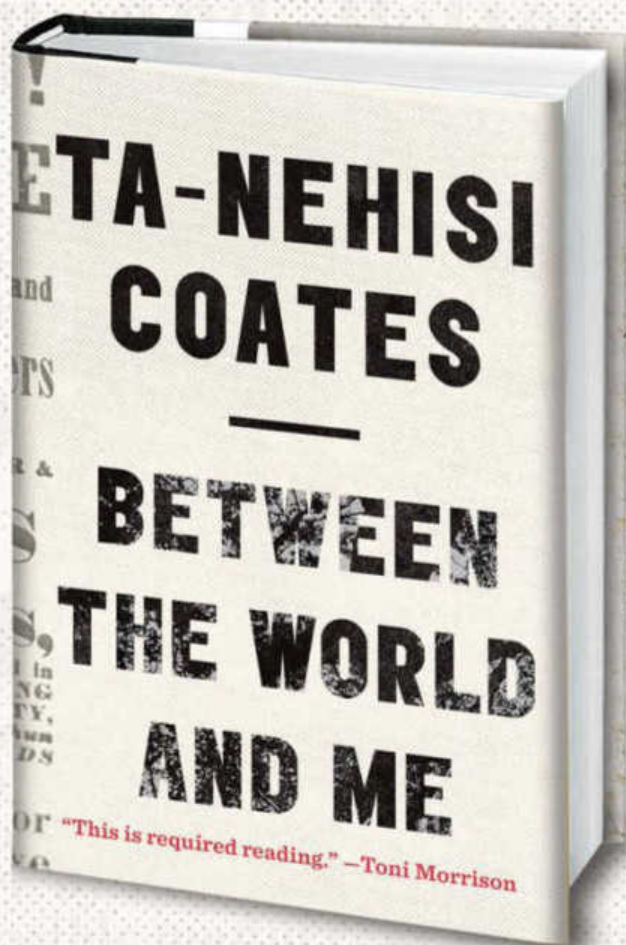
The United States has never produced a Lionel Messi.

FROM THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
“The Case for Reparations”

“This is required reading.

I’ve been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates. His examination of the hazards and hopes of black male life is as profound as it is revelatory.”

—TONI MORRISON



“An instant classic.”

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author of *The Warmth of Other Suns*

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lesson plans describing their practice drills, predicting errors that players would be likely to make along the way (accidentally fouling another player, say, or letting the ball drift too far from their feet), and describing the ways they would try to correct these mistakes. Next he played a short video of a girls' soccer practice in which players fumbled through a poorly explained drill. (The girls had been asked to do too many things at once, a classic mistake.) He called on the coaches by name, just as he trains teachers to do, asking small questions to check that they understood what he was teaching. "What did you notice, T.J.?" "Why didn't the girls understand, Ryan?" He puts the question before the name so that everyone feels compelled to contemplate an answer. Lemov takes the mechanics of teaching deadly seriously, in hopes that his pupils will too. Before the lesson ended, he'd called on everyone, including "God."

Finally, the coaches headed outside to observe one of their own, T. J. White, leading a practice. White explained the first drill to a group of 20 not-quite-adolescent boys, and soon the frigid air filled with shouts. "Over here!" "What are you doing?" "Yes!" "Back corner!" For an hour, they played happily, paying no attention to the scrum of adults watching from the sideline.

At the center of the group stood Lemov, who was busy taking notes. He timed how long White took to explain each new activity. Could he have been quicker, so that the kids stayed engaged and spent more time playing? Lemov counted the number of quality touches on the ball per minute. Were all the kids getting lots of chances to play? He watched to see whether White had designed the drills in such a way that he could easily look at all the kids at once and assess whether they had mastered a given skill before moving on.

As White ran his practice, he called on players to check for understanding, just as Lemov had. He gave the kids breaks, but they were short, so as to keep things moving. His voice remained calm and positive throughout. When the practice ended, White jogged over

to the other coaches. "You're a little bit nervous in that situation," he told me later. "I've never been given feedback in front of 18 people."

Lemov described what he'd seen, using words rarely strung together on a soccer field: "Competitive, joyful, and intelligent." White nodded, looking worried. Lemov asked him how he thought the practice had gone and listened carefully. Finally, he made a suggestion so delicately worded that it almost seemed like an afterthought: "I found myself

wondering what would happen," he said, "if you did just one drill instead of three and layered on challenges within that one drill." White agreed that might be worth trying. Then Lemov closed with the ultimate compliment: "I'd let my son play for you." With that, White smiled for the first time all night, and the two men shook hands. **A**

*Amanda Ripley is a senior fellow at the Emerson Collective and the author of **The Smartest Kids in the World**.*



• VERY SHORT BOOK EXCERPT

OFF WITH THEIR BEARDS!

THE REVOLUTION THAT ended the reign of beards occurred on September 30, 331 B.C., as Alexander the Great prepared for a decisive showdown with the Persian emperor for control of Asia. On that day, he ordered his men to shave. Yet from time immemorial in Greek culture, a smooth chin on a grown man had been taken as a sign of effeminacy or degeneracy. What can explain this unprecedented command? When the commander Parmenio asked the reason, according to the ancient historian Plutarch, Alexander replied, "Don't you know that in battles there is nothing handier to grasp than a beard?" But there is ample cause to doubt Plutarch's explanation. Stories of beard-pulling in battles were myth rather than history. Plutarch and later historians misunderstood the order because they neglected the most relevant fact, namely that Alexander had dared to do what no self-respecting Greek leader had ever done before: shave his face, likening himself to the demigod Heracles, rendered in painting and sculpture in the immortal splendor of youthful, beardless nudity. Alexander wished above all, as he told his generals before the battle, that each man would see himself as a crucial part of the mission. They would certainly see this more clearly if each of them looked more like their heroic commander.

— Adapted from *Of Beards and Men: The Revealing History of Facial Hair*, by Christopher Oldstone-Moore, published by the University of Chicago Press in January



• BUSINESS

What China Could Learn From Richard Nixon

The country's growth is inexorably slowing. The wrong response could make that problem much worse.

BY SEBASTIAN MALLABY

AN ANXIOUS SUPERPOWER is confounded by a troubled economy. For a generation, its growth has been envied; now that growth is decelerating sharply. For decades, it has shaped and guided its economy via tight control of its banks; now that lever is malfunctioning. For years, it has carefully managed its exchange rate and limited the flow of capital across its borders; now the dam is cracking. To anyone who keeps up with the news, the superpower would seem easy to identify: China. But for those with a long memory, it could just as well be the United States of the Nixon era.

Like China today, the United States of the 1970s experienced an abrupt economic slowdown. Its economy had expanded by 4.4 percent a year, on average, during the go-go '50s and '60s, but growth slowed by about one-quarter

during the following decade, to 3.2 percent a year. Even though growth of more than 3 percent may sound robust by today's standards, at the time it felt ghastly. *Time* magazine lamented in 1974 that "middle-class people are being pushed into such demeaning economies as buying clothes at rummage sales"; a year or so later, its cover asked, "Can Capitalism Survive?" In September 1975, after President Gerald Ford survived two attempts on his life in quick succession, an adviser named Alan Greenspan responded with a memo about the "nihilism, radicalism, and violence" that seemed to grip some Americans. When New York City flirted with bankruptcy, its plight was taken as a symbol of broader moral and cultural decay.

People are happiest when they experience better-than-expected progress. The U.S. deceleration of the 1970s brought on

a national melancholia, culminating in 1979 with Jimmy Carter's hand-wringing in what came to be known as his "malaise speech," even though Carter never used that term. In today's China, where the government hates nothing more than to express weakness, the signals may not be so obvious: Xi Jinping is not about to don a cardigan and ruminate about "a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will." But China's economic slowdown is nonetheless likely to take an insidious toll on the Chinese psyche. The country's growth has slowed from an average annual rate of about 10 percent in the 2000s to an estimated 6.9 percent in 2015. And although the new rate remains impressive relative to that of most countries, the deceleration—and hence the shock to expectations—is sharper than that experienced in the United States four decades ago.

Indeed, China's slowdown may be especially tumultuous because its society is under acute stress. Pollution, inequality, corruption, and precipitous urbanization have complicated the country's growth miracle: A range of studies finds that economic progress has yielded surprisingly few gains in self-reported life satisfaction; in fact, among poor Chinese in urban areas, life satisfaction since 1990 has declined. Slower and more balanced growth, involving a shift away from dirty manufacturing, may eventually ease some of these stresses. But the slowdown's immediate effect will be greater insecurity, as companies that had bet aggressively on limitless growth find themselves lumbered with unprofitable factories or empty apartment blocks. Many will lay off workers or go bust.

If China's slowdown were temporary, this might not matter much. But the country's deceleration is likely to become more severe. China's growth has been founded upon exports, yet there is a limit to how much China's trade surplus can expand without triggering a protectionist backlash. China's growth has also been powered by favorable demography, but as today's missing children become tomorrow's missing adults, the ratio of workers to dependents will

deteriorate and the demographic dividend will give way to a demographic tax. Most crucially of all, China's growth has been built on an extraordinary level of investment, recently financed by an extraordinary level of debt. But, as we shall see presently, this road to riches leads over a cliff. China's economic miracle is very likely at its end.

DOWNSHIFTING IS ALWAYS painful, but politicians often make it more painful—and ultimately more destabilizing—than it needs to be. That was certainly the case in the U.S. in the 1970s, and Chinese leaders would do well to learn from America's experience. The first and most important lesson is to accept the slowdown gracefully. Denial and resistance only make the problems worse.

Like China's current leadership, Richard Nixon feared the political fallout from a slowdown, and so resisted hard. He bullied the Federal Reserve into conjuring up a stimulus, just as China's ruling State Council recently directed the People's Bank of China to cut interest rates. He propped up the defense contractor Lockheed, much as China's government supports large state-owned enterprises. He unleashed government-sponsored lenders to shovel credit into the economy—for the mortgage-finance companies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, substitute China's state-owned banking behemoths.

Inevitably, Nixon's efforts to force growth above its natural level stoked inflation, to which the president responded with almost-communist control measures: A new Price Commission, led by Donald Rumsfeld, tried to freeze prices by diktat, drawing unenforceable distinctions between apples and apple-sauce, popped and unpopped corn. Not surprisingly, the controls cracked after a short period; inflation resumed, and the rest of the 1970s were a stagflationary nightmare. In sum, by denying the inevitability of the slowdown, Nixon helped set the country on a path to double-digit inflation, wiping out savings and eventually forcing the Fed to respond with extremely tough medicine, which inflicted back-to-back recessions

on Americans at the start of the 1980s.

In today's strange economic circumstances, inflation poses no immediate threat to any major nation, China included. But if China's leaders follow Nixon in resisting an inevitable slowdown, the penalty will show up elsewhere. By trying to boost growth with low interest rates and government-directed lending, China will add to its debt burden, which already jumped from 134 percent of GDP in 2007 to 217 percent in the second quarter of 2014, according to McKinsey. In itself, that ratio is manageable, but the trajectory isn't: The debts of the government, and of the banks that are effectively a part of it, are expanding at about twice the rate of the economy, according to the China watcher Michael Pettis—which is to say that debt is piling up much faster than the country's ability to repay it. Like the U.S. four decades ago, China will discover that a reality-defying stimulus only makes matters worse.

The second American lesson for China concerns financial reform. Again, this was a challenge Nixon refused to face squarely, even though most economists urged him to be bold. By the time of his inauguration, America's outdated system of capping bank-deposit rates—the same sort of system that still exists in China—had been rendered dysfunctional, and for reasons that contemporary China watchers would quickly recognize. Once upon a time, the caps had usefully forced down banks' cost of capital, allowing them to make cheap loans to the industries that fueled growth. But as the U.S. economy developed and the financial system grew more sophisticated, new types of savings vehicles sprang up, offering market-linked interest payments; because those market rates were more attractive, savers voted with their wallets. As deposits migrated from banks to upstart rivals, small businesses, which relied on bank loans, found credit hard to come by. Home buyers faced a similar credit crunch.

Acknowledging the case for change, Nixon appointed a financial-reform

commission in 1970. But the president found the commission's ideas toxic. "There's going to be a lot of crockery broken," a White House aide warned him: The reformers were suggesting freer competition, which would end the credit droughts in key patches of the economy—but also push weaker (yet politically vocal) lenders to the wall. Seldom eager to elevate principle above politics, Nixon decided to do nothing. In the absence of an intelligent reform plan, finance was left to modernize haphazardly. Excluded by regulation from the mortgage business, banks experimented with foreign ventures—and squandered their shareholders' capital on drunken Latin American lending. Unable to coast on cheap deposits, savings-and-loan associations tried to compensate with racier investments. The resulting savings-and-loan crisis would eventually cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$100 billion.

China today is in a similar quandary. Caps on deposit interest rates allow banks to vacuum up cheap capital and lend it to favored companies; if the government messes with this system, much crockery will be broken. But the status quo is unsustainable. The artificially low returns to savers represent a vast hidden tax on Chinese families, crimping consumption and forcing China to rely unhealthily on investment spending to power growth.

And because politics determines who gets the cheap loans that are made possible by capped deposit rates, capital flows to political cronies rather than to the innovators who have the best ideas. The result is a machine for expropriating savers and then squandering the proceeds. Sooner rather than later, China needs a financial system that generates fewer bad loans, makes better use of savings, and frees consumers to become the engine of the nation's economic growth.

The final American lesson for China concerns the exchange rate. In the post-war era, the United States pegged its currency to gold, much as in recent years China has mostly pegged its currency to the dollar. But in August 1971, as part

China's society is already under acute stress.

of his attempt to boost growth, Nixon abandoned the gold link, allowing the dollar to fall precipitously against the currencies of America's trading partners. China now seems tempted to pursue a cautious version of this strategy, and for similar reasons: Devaluing a currency and thereby boosting exports is seductive. But exchange-rate regimes work best when a currency is either truly fixed to a peg or allowed to float freely; the middle ground is treacherous. If a country begins devaluation but stops short of allowing its currency to reach its natural level, investors will expect the currency's value to fall further, and will therefore withdraw money from the country. As that happens, their expectations may well become self-fulfilling.

Nixon thought he could follow devaluation with a new, refixed exchange rate. But his efforts failed embarrassingly, compounding the volatility of the dollar. Likewise, China discovered last summer that a modest depreciation can create expectations of more depreciation, triggering a burst of capital flight. A renewed exodus of money in November suggested that the danger was still present. The currency turmoil in January underscored the point.

Nixon's setbacks in the 1970s serve to remind Westerners not to judge others too arrogantly. But at the same time, they stand as a warning. When navigating big economic transitions, halfhearted policy adjustments are usually inadequate, and the costs of timidity will be more than just financial. In the U.S. the costs included a decline of public trust in institutions, a spate of national self-questioning, and eventually an embrace of radical remedies: aggressive deregulation, monetarism, deficit-fueling tax cuts. If China cannot navigate its deceleration more deftly, Xi's successor may one day be reduced to addressing his countrymen about lost national confidence. Perhaps a Chinese magazine will even pose the question "Can Communism Survive?" **A**

Sebastian Mallaby is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of a forthcoming biography of Alan Greenspan.

• STUDY OF STUDIES

Face Value

Why we're terrible at reading faces—yet quick to judge them

BY NAOMI SHARP

THE TRUTH was written all over her face. The eyes are the window to the soul. From our clichés, you would think that we could read faces like they were ... well, open books. In fact, the skill has more in common with dancing, or writing confessional poetry: People tend to overestimate their ability to do it.

Most of us can't distinguish between certain expressions without contextual clues. In one study, participants were unable to tell whether faces in photos were showing pain or sexual pleasure about a quarter of the time **[1]**. In another, when people watched silent videos of the same person experiencing pain and faking pain, they couldn't tell which was which. A computer was correct 85 percent of the time **[2]**. Computers were also better at telling that a person was smiling out of mild frustration rather than genuine delight **[3]**.

And yet, as bad as we are at reading expressions, we jump to all kinds of conclusions based on people's faces.

We might scoff at the ancient Greek belief in physiognomy—assessing character on the basis of facial features—but we unwittingly practice it daily. Recent research shows that while there's practically no evidence that faces reveal character, we nonetheless behave as if certain features signal certain traits **[4]**.



People with stereotypically "feminine" facial features seem more trustworthy; those with lower eyebrows appear more dominant **[5]**. In another study, people were ready to decide whether an unfamiliar face should be trusted after looking at it for just 200 milliseconds. Even when given a chance to look longer, they rarely changed their mind **[6]**.

Such judgments can defy logic. Subjects playing a trust game invested more money with a player who had a trustworthy face than with one who didn't—even when the two players had the same reputation **[7]**. Another study reported that jurors needed less evidence to convict a person with an untrustworthy face **[8]**. And a researcher focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict found that a Palestinian peace offering was more likely to be accepted by Jewish Israeli respondents if it was attributed to a politician with "babyfacedness" (big eyes, plump lips) **[9]**.

Which brings us to a contradiction. A person's face may not reflect her nature, and yet research finds that specific facial features do seem to influence futures **[10]**. U.S. Army War College graduates with dominant-looking faces are more likely than their peers to become generals **[11]**; people whose faces appear competent are more likely to become CEOs of successful companies **[12]**. This makes a certain sense. If everyone assumes strong-chinned Stanley is an assertive person, he's more likely to become one. Perhaps by treating others as though their face reveals their character, we prompt them to become the people we assumed them to be. **A**

THE STUDIES:

[1] Hughes and Nicholson, "Sex Differences in the Assessment of Pain Versus Sexual Pleasure Facial Expressions" (*Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, Dec. 2008)

[2] Bartlett et al., "Automatic Decoding of Facial Movements Reveals Deceptive Pain Expressions" (*Current Biology*, March 2014)

[3] Hoque et al., "Exploring Temporal Patterns in Classifying Frustrated and Delighted Smiles" (*IEEE Transactions on Affective Computing*, July–Sept. 2012)

[4] Todorov et al., "Social Attributions From Faces" (*Annual Review of Psychology*, 2015)

[5] Oosterhof and Todorov, "The Functional Basis of Face Evaluation" (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Aug. 2008)

[6] Todorov et al., "Evaluating Faces on Trustworthiness After Minimal Time Exposure" (*Social Cognition*, Dec. 2009)

[7] Rezsescu et al., "Unfamiliar Facial Configurations Affect Strategic Choices in Trust Games With or Without Information About Past Behavior" (*PLOS One*, March 2012)

[8] Porter et al., "Dangerous Decisions" (*Psychology, Crime & Law*, May 2010)

[9] Maoz, "The Face of the

Enemy" (*Political Communication*, July 2012)

[10] Olivola et al., "Social Attributions From Faces Bias Human Choices" (*Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Nov. 2014)

[11] Mazur and Mueller, "Channel Modeling: From West Point Cadet to General" (*Public Administration Review*, March–April 1996)

[12] Graham et al., "A Corporate Beauty Contest" (*Management Science*, forthcoming)

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• TECHNOLOGY

The Future of Fraud-Busting

How we'll stop scams before they occur

BY MARIA KONNIKOVA

HUMANS ARE startlingly bad at detecting fraud. Even when we're on the lookout for signs of deception, studies show, our accuracy is hardly better than chance.

Technology has opened the door to new and more pervasive forms of fraud: Americans lose an estimated \$50 billion a year to con artists around the world, according to the Financial Fraud Research Center at Stanford University. But because computers aren't subject to the foibles of emotion and what we like to call "intuition," they can also help protect us. Here's how leading fraud researchers, neuroscientists, psychiatrists, and computer scientists think technology can be put to work to fight fraud however it occurs—in person, online, or over the phone.

1 Suspicious Story Lines

Spam filters are supposed to block e-mail scams from ever reaching us, but criminals have learned to circumvent them by personalizing their notes with information gleaned from the Internet and by grooming victims over time.

In response, a company called ZapFraud is turning to natural-language analytics: Instead of flagging key words, it looks for narrative patterns symptomatic of fraud. For instance, a message could contain a statement of surprise, the mention of a sum of money, and a call to action. "Those are the hallmark expressions of one particular fraud e-mail," Markus Jakobsson, the company's founder, told me. "There's a tremendous number of [spam] e-mails, but a small number of story lines."

In the future, this technology could go beyond e-mail filtering to also flag text messages, interactions on social media, messages on dating sites, even years-long "friendships." Aaron Emigh, ZapFraud's interim CEO, told me he'd stopped a woman from wiring money to a "fellow widow" she'd met on a Christian site for grieving people. He hopes that as natural-language analytics evolves, such warnings can be wholly automated.

2 Truth Filters

A similar approach could help combat fraud by flagging false statements on social media. (Disinformation creates opportunities for con artists to profit. In 2015, for instance, a scammer posted a fake *Bloomberg* article with news of a Twitter buyout offer—moving markets and making a little cash in the process.)

Kalina Bontcheva, a computer scientist who researches natural-language processing at the University of Sheffield, in England, is leading a project that examines streams of social data to identify rumors and estimate their veracity by analyzing the semantics, cross-referencing information with trusted sources (such as PubMed, for medical information), identifying the point of origin and pattern of dissemination, and the like. Bontcheva is part of a research collaboration called PHEME, which plans to flag misleading tweets and posts and classify them by severity: speculation, controversy, misinformation, or disinformation.

3 In-the-Moment Warnings

Picture yourself walking down the street when a man approaches and asks for bus fare; he says he lost his wallet and needs to get home. Right away, your phone buzzes with a notification: *Stay away. He's a fraud.* The same voice has been asking for money in different locations all week. Such a possibility sounds far-fetched, but your phone

A BRIEF CHRONICLE OF FRAUD

CIRCA 300 B.C.: In the earliest fraud attempt on record, a Greek merchant tries to sink his ship and collect insurance.



1496: A 20-year-old Michelangelo forges an ancient sculpture of Cupid and sells it to a cardinal.

1704: A Frenchman claiming to be a native of Formosa (modern-day Taiwan) publishes a book describing made-up customs like drinking viper's blood for breakfast.



1863: President Lincoln signs the False Claims Act to counter the sale of fraudulent supplies to the Union Army.

HISTORY

300 B.C.

1500

1700

1800

1850

»

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Consulting

company already gathers information from all the phones in its network, and several tech firms are developing voice-biometrics software that can identify individuals and even catch emotional patterns that may indicate deceit.

“It’s not far off that our smartphone or watch is listening in to all of our conversations and understanding them,” Emigh told me. “It opens up the possibility of employing [fraud-prevention] technology across lots of in-person domains, not just e-mail.” Imagine, he said, that a fraud-prevention company has enough data on your behavior—where you are, what you’re doing (an increasingly likely reality, given the ever-expanding capabilities of cellphones and Americans’ willingness to trade personal privacy for convenience), and so on—to be able to give a heads-up anytime someone tries to take advantage of you. “If you’re an elderly couple who gets a panicked call from a hospital in Mexico that your grandson is in a coma, it’s red-flagged because he’s not in Mexico,” Emigh said. We would have a constant spy watching us—but one that does its best to act as our friend and protector.

4 Spotting Trends

Another approach comes from Big Data—combing statistics to find patterns that should tip us off to fraud. By analyzing all the companies that sell a certain kind of product, for instance, you could flag anything anomalous—one firm’s sudden spike in canceled contracts, for example—that might indicate sketchy activity. The method is similar to the one employed for credit-card fraud alerts—if you don’t usually travel abroad and suddenly buy groceries in Panama, your transaction is flagged—but on a much bigger scale. A company called Sift Science is attempting something along these lines; it uses proprietary algorithms to analyze data trends and discern patterns of possible fraud.

Information gleaned from patterns

in fraud can also be funneled directly to potential victims. AARP has been reviewing recordings of hundreds of fraudulent phone calls obtained by the FBI in order to analyze the persuasive tactics used by con artists, and then teaching its members about those tactics. For instance, fraudsters use something known as “phantom fixation”—encouraging you to focus on a huge future gain that far outweighs any investment you might need to make in the present. Studies show that telling people about such techniques can help them recognize a hoax.

5 Minority Report for Fraud

Perhaps one day we’ll be able to identify and block not just scams but the scammers themselves—before they even target their first victim.

Each year, the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners conducts a study of known scammers. It looks at demographic information, distinguishing characteristics, and patterns of approach in order to gain insights on the types of people most likely to commit fraud in the future. In 50 years, Bruce Dorris, the organization’s vice president and program director, told me, “I wouldn’t be surprised if you could isolate precisely who those individuals are.”

As our understanding of fraud evolves, we might one day be able to develop predictive algorithms that could identify would-be con artists based on patterns of behavior. Or perhaps we’ll use brain scans. Some scientists claim that brain scans can reveal psychopathic tendencies. What if we could similarly identify characteristics of likely con artists, and then intervene before they cause trouble?

“It’s possible that 50 years out,” Emigh told me, “authorities will be able to figure out the plausibility of fraud and identify potential bad actors. There’s also a possibility, of course, that we decide that’s not the world we want to live in.”

6 Enhanced Lie Detection

No method of fraud prevention will be perfect. “You can put seven locks on your door, fingerprint technology, a retinal display. And you forget to close the window,” Moran Cerf, a professor of business and neuroscience at Northwestern University and a former hacker, told me. “The only way to prevent fraud completely is to eliminate humans from the process. They are the weakest link.”

When scammers do make it through our safeguards, new lie-detection techniques could prove useful after the fact. Over the past few years, methods that involve analyzing fleeting facial expressions or screening for a certain pheromone associated with stress have shown promising results.

The most widely anticipated approach, however, involves watching what goes on inside the brain. At the University of Pennsylvania, an associate professor of psychiatry named Daniel Langleben studies the ways in which neural activity can signify lying. Langleben hypothesizes that suppressing the truth requires additional cognitive operations that can be detected by fMRI. He also looks for so-called concealed information, which indicates that people know something they shouldn’t: Does your brain scan show that you recognize a fraud victim, for instance, after you said you don’t know him? In a forthcoming paper, Langleben and his team report that the fMRI-based method outperformed traditional polygraphy by at least 14 percent.

“There’s one caveat to all of this,” Langleben said. “What’s really important is how you ask the question. A flawed questioning technique can’t be helped by a fancy scanner.”

Maria Konnikova is the author, most recently, of The Confidence Game: Why We Fall for It ... Every Time, and a contributing writer for The New Yorker.

1920: Charles Ponzi collects about \$15 million in eight months through his fraudulent investment company.

1925: An Austro-Hungarian con man known as “The Count” sells the Eiffel Tower to a scrap-metal dealer.

1989: Nigerian fraudsters send messages via telex to British businessmen, seeking a small investment for a huge future payoff.

1995: British police arrest John Myatt for forging paintings by Monet, van Gogh, Matisse, and other masters.

2015

2065: Neuroscientists learn how to identify characteristics of con artists by their brain scans.

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•WORKS IN PROGRESS

Tying Paris Back Together

Can expanding the Métro unite the city and its troubled *banlieues*?

BY HENRY GRABAR

SEVERAL STORIES beneath the streets of the 17th arrondissement, a tunnel-boring machine ① 25 feet in diameter is grinding through the wet Parisian earth. After a few hours of gains, engineers pause the drilling long enough for the machine to lock together the curved trapezoids of concrete that form the tunnel wall ②. Dig, build, repeat. The cycle continues through the night, every night, with the whole sunken work site ③ proceeding south 40 feet a day toward the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris's second-busiest rail

station. Seventy men on the world's slowest train to Paris.

Here begins the most ambitious new subway project in the Western world. The extension of Line 14 is but the first leg of the Grand Paris Express, a \$25 billion expansion of the century-old Paris Métro ④. By the time the project is completed in 2030, the system will have gained four lines, 68 stations, and more than 120 miles of track. Planners estimate that the build-out will boost the entire network's ridership by almost 40 percent.

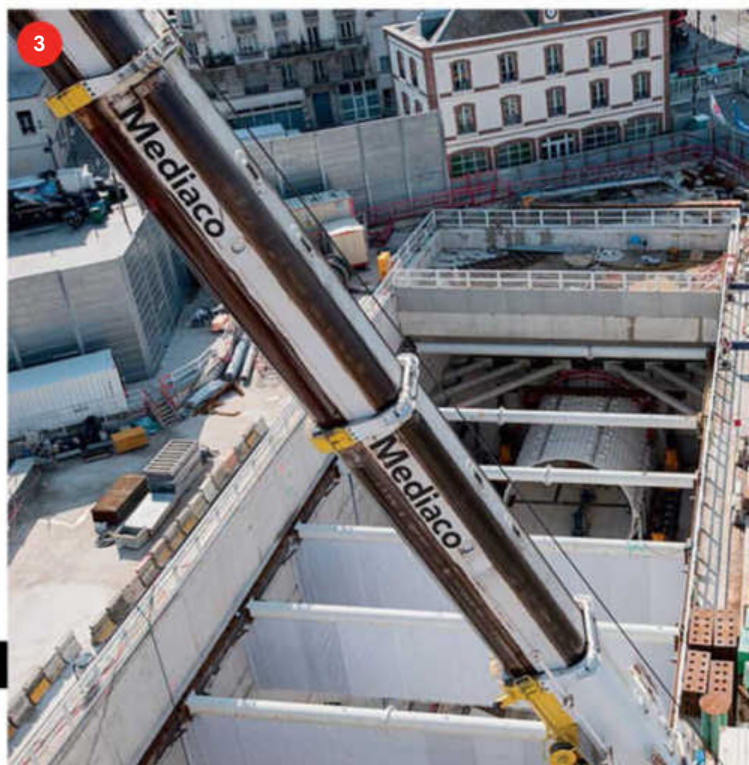
The goals: Reduce the smog-choked region's car

traffic. Link business districts, airports, and universities. Ease social ills by knitting together the French capital's isolated and troubled *banlieues*, much as the initial Métro construction ⑤ did for the outlying districts of Paris proper at the dawn of the 20th century.

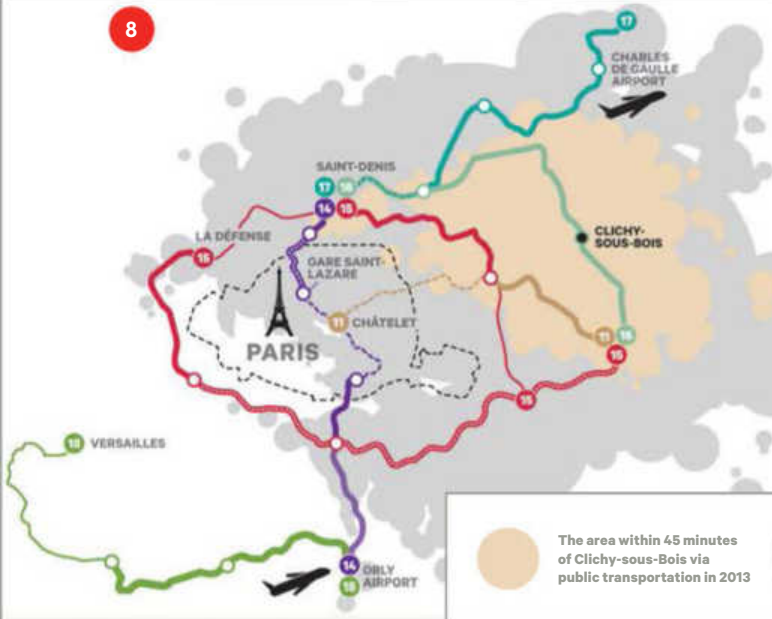
Once the drill now inching its way underneath the 17th arrondissement has reached the existing Line 14 terminus, it will reverse course and head—like all future subway construction in Paris—back toward the suburbs. Those suburbs don't look much like their American equivalents. Europe's largest business district (La Défense) lies outside Paris, as do the

world's largest fresh-produce market, a handful of universities, most of the region's public housing, and several small cities with population densities higher than that of Paris itself. Not even one in five of the region's residents live inside the French capital's boundaries—a lower ratio of core population to suburban population than in London, Madrid, Barcelona, Berlin, Hamburg, Milan, or Rome.

The region's transportation system hasn't caught up to this reality. The founding engineer of the Métro, Fulgence Bienvenüe, is said to have endeavored to place a station within 400 meters of every point in Paris—a goal nearly realized within the



1, 2, 3: RATP-ING-ISABELLE BONNET; 4: DUBASSY/SHUTTERSTOCK; 5: WIKIMEDIA; 6: JOEL ROBINE/AFP/GETTY; 7: MICHEL SPINGLER/AP; 8: ISOCHRON FROM APUR; MÉTRO-LINE INFORMATION FROM SOCIÉTÉ DU GRAND PARIS; 9 (RENDERING): KENGO KUMA AND ASSOCIATES



GRAND PARIS EXPRESS MÉTRO EXPANSION

Estimated completion date



city limits. But beyond the Boulevard Périphérique, the ring road that bounds Paris, the tracks of the Métro and its long-distance partner, the

RER commuter rail, protrude like spokes from a hub. Train travel between neighboring Parisian suburbs often requires a long and inefficient journey into and then back out of Paris. To a straphanger, suburban Paris is a series of islands linked to the Parisian mainland but not to one another.

Three of the new lines

will run north and east of Paris, through Seine-Saint-Denis, the poorest of the 96 departments in France. Among French cities with at least 50,000 people, six of the seven with the highest percentage of foreign-born residents are in Seine-Saint-Denis. Residents of Clichy-sous-Bois 6, where the riots that swept the region

in 2005 began 7, will for the first time find central Paris within a 45-minute train ride 8. The town of Saint-Denis, the site of the standoff between police and the terrorists who struck Paris in November, will be home to the project's largest train station. Designed by the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, the junction is expected to handle 250,000 passengers a day 9.

Benoît Quessard, an urban planner for the local government, told me that he sees the expansion as not merely "an economic wager but also a social one." In this sense, it will test an old Parisian belief about the Métro conferring, beyond convenience, a kind of citizenship on its riders. In 1904, four years after the first line opened, the writer Jules Romains predicted that the system would be a "living, fluid cement that will succeed in holding men together." 4





The CULTURE FILE

THE OMNIVORE

Why We Still Miss Jon Stewart

The *Daily Show* host, Trevor Noah, is smooth and charming, but he has yet to find an edge that's equal to the political moment.

BY JAMES PARKER

IT'S A PSYCHIC LAW of the American workplace: By the time you give your notice, you've already left. You've checked out, and for the days or weeks that remain, a kind of placeholder-you, a you-cipher, will be doing your job. It's a law that applies equally to dog walkers, accountants, and spoof TV anchor-

men. Jon Stewart announced that he was quitting *The Daily Show* in February 2015, but he stuck around until early August, and those last months had a restless, frazzled, long-lingering feel. A smell of ashes was in the air. The host himself suddenly looked quite old: beaky, pique-y, hollow-cheeky. For 16 years he had shaken his bells, jumped and jangled in his little host's chair, the only man on TV who could caper while sitting behind a desk. Flash back to his first episode as the *Daily Show* host, succeeding Craig Kilborn: January 11, 1999, Stewart with floppy, luscious black hair, twitching in a new suit ("I feel like this is my bar mitzvah ... I have a rash like you wouldn't believe.") while he interviews Michael J. Fox.

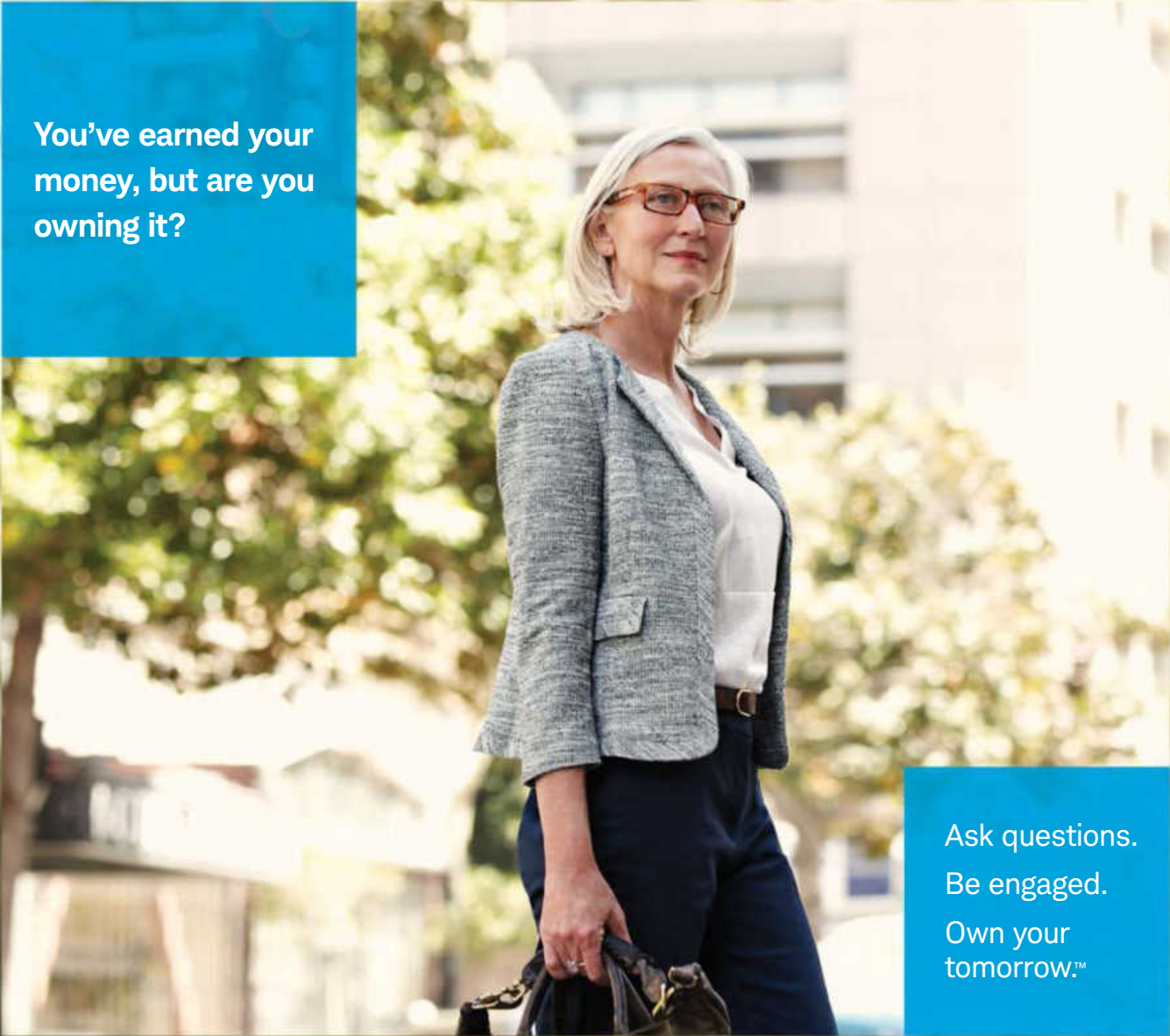
Was he leaving us now? Really? Deserting us just as the gargantuan shadow of the Trump campaign, that

neo-fascist bouncy castle, began to rise wobblingly over the country? Kick out the Mexicans. Ban the Muslims. Mock the disabled. Restore America. *He's saying what everybody thinks*, we're told. Indeed he is: Trump isn't a demagogue; he's a one-man mob. Now, right now, was when we needed Stewart, our great perforator of mental tyrannies. Who else could pick out

the semitones in the hot comic drone of the Donald's voice? Who else could puncture the ideological bloat? Who else could parse this phenomenon for us as it traveled from a joke to beyond a joke to ... ?

So fine then. Go. Say good-night, Jon Stewart, and let's have a look at the new guy. What's his name? Trevor Noah. *Who?* Okay, he's black, a 32-year-old comedian from South Africa, a sharp cultural operator in his own country (apparently) but a sweet naïf in this one. Hell of a gamble, Comedy Central. I salute you. And at first, yes, it was pleasant to see young Trevor smiling away and deeply dimpling in the Stewart seat, the seat that had lately grown gray hairs. He was fresh and he was sleek. The show's format—the monologue delivered to the camera, then the segments with the correspondents, then the interview—was unchanged,





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and the writing hadn't suffered appreciably since the handover. The idea seemed to be that Noah, while coyly advertising his outsider status ("Black Friday—or, as we call it back in Africa, Friday"), would simply and smoothly channel the *geist* of *The Daily Show*.

And he was handling it, bless him, handling the material, distributing rays of easy charm. The Trump gags sounded good in that clipped, musical South African accent, and they even had a new global vibe: Trump as "the perfect African president." And that little TV blandishment that Stewart could never quite get comfortable with, the "We'll be right back" at the end of a segment? It tripped off Noah's tongue. His body language was relaxed; where the old guy had hunched over his desk, with satirical voltage crawling hairily out of his wrist-holes, the kid sat back and *rode* it. Triumph. Come to my arms, my beaming boy!

Slowly, though, it began to sink in: the dimension of our loss. Jon Stewart was gone—our sanity, our balance. This had of course been the 10-ton irony of his career: In nuking the news-givers, petarding the pundit class, he became one of them—became, in fact, *the* pundit/news-giver for a generation of viewers. As far back as 1969, Renata Adler described "that natural creator of discontinuous, lunatic constituencies, the media." In 1976, Paddy Chayefsky's *Network* raised this perception to the level of prophecy, with a rained-on, mad-as-hell Howard Beale heralding the age of the crank with a microphone, the Great Splintering and the end of the singular, authoritative, Cronkitic voice. In 1994, the British show *The Day Today*, a fake news program, parodied with surreal brutality the style of the news, the noise of the news, news itself as a production. TV news should have been impossible after *The Day Today*, but naturally it wasn't.

Reverence for the news, however, news-idolatry, was eroding steadily—to the point where, by 1999 and the start of Stewart's tenure on *The Daily Show*, the only type of news one could take seriously was the fundamentally unserious. And so satire, which appears to be hocking loogies from the margins but in fact takes its bearings from a higher authority, came blushing to occupy the middle. There was Jon Stewart on CNN's *Crossfire* in 2004, smack in the moral center, sitting like a barbed lotus between the blah on the right (Tucker Carlson) and the blah on the left (Paul Begala), destroying them both with divine satirical perspective and insisting all the while that he was just a comedian.

Stewart was a virtuosic performer, supernimble of tongue. His show had institutional memory—his characters (Jersey Guy, Jewish Granny) and his impressions: the mud-bubble

The CultureFile

THE OMNIVORE

In nuking the news-givers and petarding the pundit class, Jon Stewart became one of them.

vowels and turtle pronouncements of Mitch McConnell; the mean, back-of-the-classroom snickering of George W. Bush. Behind the news stuff there was a submerged 16-year-long stand-up act going on about Stewart's life, his frailty, his aging body. And how he could pounce on a guest!

Take January 24, 2012: Elizabeth Warren, who is running against the handsome pickup driver Scott Brown in the Massachusetts Senate race, is on *The Daily Show*. Stewart asks a question about tax cuts and Warren (*click, whirr*) goes into her stump speech: "I grew up in an America"—puffs of mist from the rhetorical atomizer—"that was still investing in the middle class. That was the principal function of Washington and how it spent money ... It's how kids like me, the daughter of some, you know, guy who sold fencing, ended up—" And, as Warren is about to say "as a professor," Stewart interrupts, full of faux concern: "You didn't know his *name*?!" It's exquisite, Warren's suddenly revealed boiled-in-the-bag folksiness, and behind that the absurd image of her father the anonymous fencing guy, who sired her and then ran off to sell more fences. There is a laugh, and then a delayed, deeper laugh as Warren slows down and finally stops. Pop goes the platitude; political speech has collapsed, and now the conversation can begin.

Trevor Noah is good; he's very good. He's never in a flap or a dither, and when he wanders (as he occasionally does) into a comedic dead spot, there's no fear in his eyes. I'm still enjoying the way his taut, spherical head and sunny personality occupy the space left by the raddled Stewart. His impression of sleepy Ben Carson—eyes shut, head back, murmuring in a kind of intellectual narcolepsy—is tremendous. When he and correspondent Hasan Minhaj do a bit on conservative Islamophobia—"White ISIS," as they call its adherents, or "wisis"—the fact that both men have brown skin gives the gag, and the anger behind the gag, a planetary resonance.

It took time, don't forget, lots of time, for Jon Stewart to build his persona and his audience on *The Daily Show*—night after night and week after week of showing up and applying himself to events, pulling his faces, delivering his lines. He wasn't always a heavyweight. Trevor Noah, currently a very able lightweight, needs time too. But he won't get any. As a culture, we're not about to nurture this talent, to give it room to grow. Our patience was exhausted long ago, by some other guy. We're going to pass judgment and move on. There's a reason Simon Cowell is so rich. Impress us today or get thee hence. So it comes to this: It's now or never, Trevor. **A**

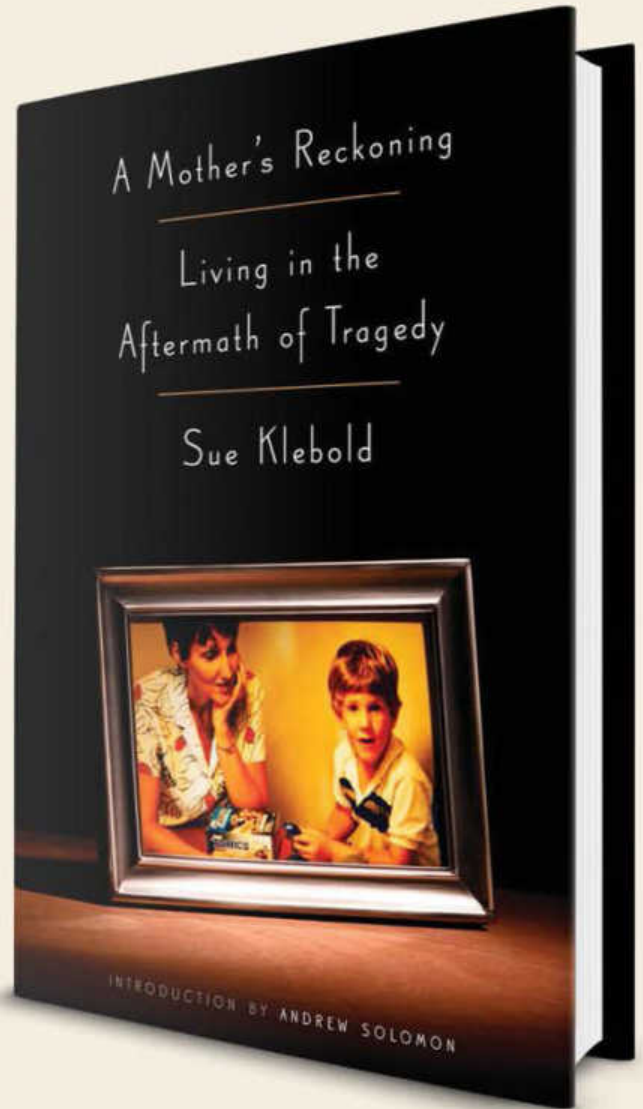
James Parker is an Atlantic contributing editor.

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—Andrew Solomon,
FROM HIS INTRODUCTION



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BOOKS

Critic Without a Cause

Criticism can be fun, A. O. Scott promises, genially evading serious cultural debate.

BY LEON WIESELTIER

“YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR LIFE.” Those are the severe and startling words that conclude a renowned sonnet Rilke wrote in 1908, after an encounter with an ancient marble torso in the Louvre. They suggest that an experience of art is akin to a conversion experience, that an encounter with art confers not only ravishments but also obligations, that a sense of the beauty of existence entails a sense of the gravity of existence. Even the most transient of impressions may be a summons—a call to a commitment, to a spirit of seriousness about what is at stake in a life. It is an exorbitant demand.

Rilke, of course, was an athlete of transformations and an addict of transfigurations; the distinction between feeling and swooning was sometimes lost on him; and he was comically without humor. For a certain contrary impious temperament, the commandment at the end of “Archaic Torso of Apollo” will seem obnoxious, the pomp of an aesthete. (“Rilke was a *jerk*,” wrote Berryman with a vengeful hilarity.) Still, correcting for all the programmatic ejaculations of the Rilkean spirit, there is something inescapable about the poem’s injunction. It represents a lasting challenge to lazy habits of demystification, and to the contemporary idols of irony and charm. Perhaps there is nothing ridiculous, after all, about grandeur and consecration and transcendence and a single view of the world. Perhaps one should not return unchanged from a museum. Perhaps a decision does have to be made.

A. O. Scott is of many minds about this, as he is of many minds about

everything. Rilke’s poem figures prominently in his book and he analyzes it skillfully, though he puts it in the company of the chic stunts of Marina Abramović. He describes its theme as the “momentarily disruptive impact of art on the equilibrium of everyday consciousness.” Scott is a cultivated man—one of his chapters consists in not much more than a run through Aristotle, Pope, Keats, Shelley, Arnold, Emerson, Addison DeWitt, R. P. Blackmur, Elizabeth Hardwick, Robert Warshow, and Susan Sontag—and he yields to nobody in his belief in the power of art. But the implications of its power make him jittery. Surely there is nothing momentary about the aftermath of the revelation in Rilke’s poem. And there is nothing “hyperbolic,” as Scott says there is, about the poet’s imperative to alter one’s life, at least not for the poet.

“People say this kind of thing all the time,” Scott explains. “Magazines publish surveys in which celebrities are asked to name the book, film, or song that changed their lives.” Indeed they do. Why is this important? Who cares what celebrities do? The vulgarization of “you must change your life” into the American pastime of personal growth may be less an indictment of Rilke and his preferred state of concentration, and more an indictment of us and our preferred state of dispersal. When it comes to the question of what bearing the lower realities of American culture should have upon its higher ambitions, Scott regularly acquiesces in too much. “Culture now lives almost entirely under the rubric of consumption,” he proclaims. Speak for yourself, friend. The fight for the integrity of aesthetic experience is not over.

Scott is not a fighter, he is a man on the scene. And so he continues, in the leveling voice of the wisecracking idealist that characterizes the whole of his book:

Relatively few are likely to heed the instructions Rilke inferred ... Honestly, who has the time? Schoolchildren, tour-group visitants disgorged from buses, solitary students, honeymooners, and the handful of actual Parisians wandering the corridors will no doubt resume whatever lives they were leading before they came.

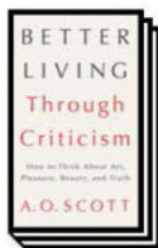
And so they should. Rilke did, too. After he left the Louvre, he continued to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The challenge that he issued in his poem was, rather, an inward challenge—whether the refreshment of the senses and the refinement of the mind that attends an experience of art can be made somehow to last, so that one comes to live more significantly in the commonplace, at a higher plane of consciousness. Honestly, who does not have the time? But such a duty discomfited Scott. He honors the heights but gladly descends from them, all the while wondering anxiously whether something a little less sublime, a more easeful ideal of the engagement with art, does not shrivel him into a fan or a consumer. The anxiety is fully warranted.

BETTER LIVING THROUGH CRITICISM: *How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth*—the title is a kind of reverse trigger warning. It offers friendly assurance to anyone who might be daunted by its vast abstractions. It is a promise of fun, which may be the only form in which we are now prepared to take our intellectual medicine. Scott's subject is the nature of criticism, which is his profession (he is a movie critic for *The New York Times*) and his vocation, and he broaches his subject, which is as ancient as Aristotle and Longinus, with a preening account of his Twitter war with Samuel L. Jackson about *The Avengers*. As I say, fun.

About criticism Scott has various things to say—"that it is an art form in its own right; that it exists to enhance the glory of the other arts; that it is an impossible activity; that it is necessary and vital to human self-understanding; that it can never die; that it is in perpetual danger of extinction"—but his thinking vanishes into a jovial blur of local perceptions and easy paradoxes. The reader will learn many things about criticism but finally not much. These pages are full of big ideas chatted away. Philosophy is trifled with ("Immanuel Kant, having nothing better to do in the Prussian city of Königsberg,

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A take is an opinion that has no aspiration to a belief, an impression that never hardens into a position.



BETTER LIVING THROUGH CRITICISM: HOW TO THINK ABOUT ART, PLEASURE, BEAUTY, AND TRUTH
A. O. SCOTT
Penguin

set about investigating the fundamental nature of taste"), as is profundity. In flight from intellectual heaviness, Scott arrives at intelligent weightlessness. Every notion is flipped this way and that; the answer to every question is yes and no; the proliferating examples from all the arts (Scott is vain about his range) overwhelm the observations that they are designed to illustrate; the general impression is one of an uncontrollable articulateness. Scott does not think his thoughts; he convenes them. There is not a sign of struggle anywhere.

The interest of Scott's book lies not in its contribution to the solution of the problems it treats, but in its exemplification of our moment in American culture and American cultural journalism. It is an accurate document of the discourse of "takes." This movie, that book, this poem, that painting, this record, that show: Make a smart remark and move on. A take is an opinion that has no aspiration to a belief, an impression that never hardens into a position. Its lightness is its appeal. It is provisional, evanescent, a move in a game, an accredited shallowness, a bulwark against a pause in the conversation. A take is expected not to be true but to be interesting, and even when it is interesting it makes no troublesome claim upon anybody's attention. Another take will quickly follow, and the silence that is a mark of perplexity, of research and reflection, will be mercifully kept at bay. A take asks for no affiliation. It requires no commitment.

Better Living Through Criticism is a triumph of the nonaffiliated and the noncommittal. Near the end of the book, Scott declares about his fellow critics that "whether we're cheerleading or calling bullshit, our assessment has to proceed from a sincere and serious commitment." The commitment that he has in mind is unclear: He seems to be referring to nothing more specific than a faith in the universal possibility of art, so that the critic may become more inclusive in his search for beauty. It is an excellent scruple, but it is exceedingly general. It is a commitment that is the opposite of a choice. When it comes to making choices more concretely among works and styles and doctrines and ideals, Scott is like Isabel Archer: He is a little on the side of everything. "Choosing is the primal and inevitable mistake of criticism," he asserts. In its context—he is discussing the *querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, the conflict between the ideology of the old and the ideology of the new, and arguing wisely that neither position should be dismissed—Scott's sentence is understandable, but in the context of his entire book it is a damning admission, a gaffe of conviction.

SCOTT'S AVERSION to philosophical and aesthetic commitment; his genial refusal to take any side in the quarrels over fundamentals; his merry satisfaction with a life of sampling and commenting, of "graz[ing] among the objects"; his habit of correcting high thought with the social and economic lowdown (his film reviews are often compromised by the same winking worldliness)—all of this begins to look like the anti-intellectualism of an otherwise earnest intellectual. Scott offers many alibis for his methodological shiftiness. He deplores, for example, "our stubborn inability to see things as they are":

Attempts to direct the practice of criticism, to discipline our attention in order to prevent or minimize error, typically force an uncomfortable choice: we are instructed to look at the shape or the substance, the outward aspect or the inner, often invisible core, the vessel or the essential stuff that has filled it up.

Scott does not grasp that the fullness of vision he seeks may occur not before the work of analysis and absorption, but only after it. A first look is a literal look. The controversies of interpretation—choices about sense and meaning and value and truth—are what reveal a thing in all its aspects. Believing is one of the conditions of seeing. "Ordinary objects" are never "simply themselves," except for secular mysticism of the sort that Rilke pursued: "What if we are here just for saying: *house, bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit tree, window ...*" But when we say those words, how much have we said?

Like almost everyone on almost every street corner, Scott preaches epistemological humility. It is one of the chief platitudes of the day. We are finite creatures with finite standpoints. We work in the dark and we do what we can. Everything is tentative and nothing is certain. We live after Hume and after Hayek. A dream of definitiveness is a will to power. And so on. Scott similarly abhors "brazen declarations of certainty." He takes inspiration from "the essential modesty and rigor of the scientific method." "To participate in a debate on just about any topic," he writes scoldingly, "is to state an allegiance, to declare oneself a partisan, and the difficult dialectical work of discerning the good, the beautiful, and the true is lost in the noise of contending pseudoprinciples." Maybe Isabel Archer had the proper theory of knowledge.

SCOTT'S BOOK PRESENTS a fine occasion to offer some resistance to all this relaxation, to broaden our understanding of intellectual possibility and to toughen our


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BOOKS

A sense of correctness about one's considered opinions is not mental dogmatism—it is mental self-esteem.

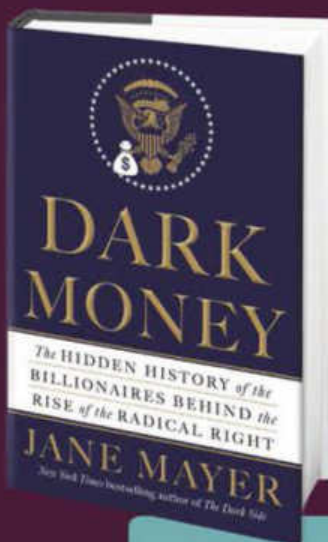
sense of intellectual urgency. Why are staunchly held and carefully defended principles "pseudo-principles"? They may be wrong, but the fervor with which they are espoused is not what proves or disproves them. Perhaps it is their specificity that counts against them, their exclusion of other principles; but this exclusion is not coerced, it is reasoned, and anyway every principle does not go with every other principle and so every principle cannot be right. And "difficult dialectical work" is hardly antithetical to "allegiance." Where is the crime in partisanship? Intellectually honest attachment is as common as intellectually dishonest detachment. There are parties, moreover, to which it is an honor to belong. A sense of correctness about one's considered opinions is not mental dogmatism—it is mental self-esteem, the confidence that comes from having gone to the trouble of rigorously defending a view, and it is thoroughly compatible with an awareness of one's fallibility.

Scott describes criticism as a realm of "intuition, judgment, and conjecture," but he has a dubious gift for judgment that shirks choice. His likes and his dislikes are never confining, or all-in; they do not inhibit his lighthearted promiscuity, his Arts and Leisure roaming, which in his pages looks merely like curiosity and an appetite for his profession. As for the sciences, modesty is hardly all they teach: They progress by defying the limits of what is known, and they owe their excitement in part to the immodesty of the astonishments that they claim to know.

So let us learn to stretch again. The impossibility of perfect certainty does not condemn us to a vapidly uncertain life, to a life of small thoughts about small things, as if all we can be are metaphysicians or shoppers. It all depends on the scale that we elect for our questions, on how high we aim. What we do not need now is another cheerful exhortation to aim low. Scott disdains, for the partiality of their perspectives, the pessimism about movies that was expressed by some of his precursors. Yet there is more wisdom about the art of cinema to be found in the complaints of Agee and Farber and Kael and Denby and Thomson than in Scott's garrulous and complacent musings, precisely because they state an allegiance. They are animated by large principle and an unembarrassed grand view of the art. They are *criticism*. Scott believes in criticism, and he believes in art, pleasure, beauty, and truth, but most of all he believes in brunch. 

Leon Wieseltier is an Atlantic contributing editor and the Isaiah Berlin Senior Fellow in Culture and Policy at the Brookings Institution.

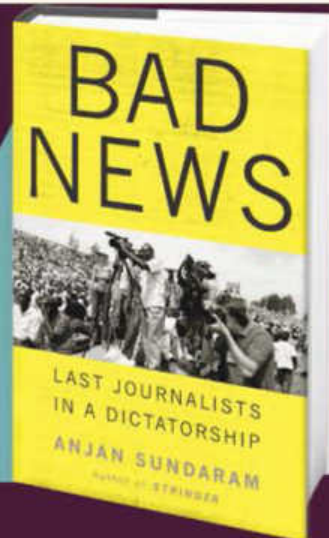
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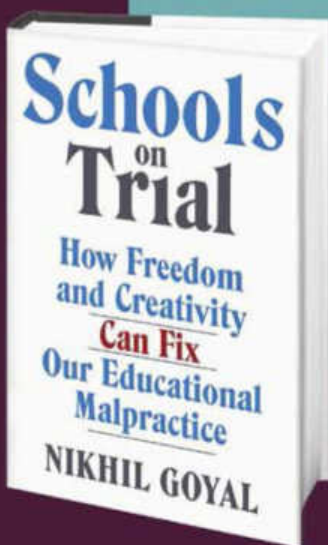
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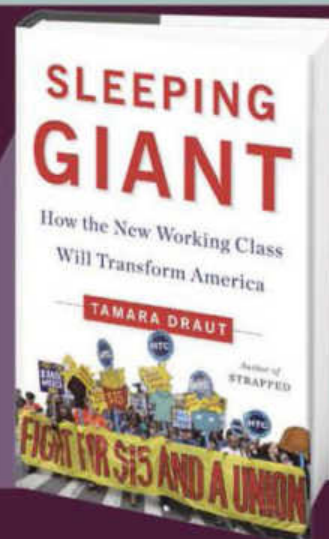
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The Leftist Origins of the Rabid Right

What modern conservatism owes to apostates from the opposite end of the ideological spectrum

BY SAM TANENHAUS

A PARADOX OF 20th-century American politics is that its most sustained ideological movement, modern conservatism, was the brainchild of ex-Communists who had been disillusioned by the crimes of the Soviet revolution or caught on the wrong side of factional disputes. Estranged and unhappy, they went in search of a new god and helped create it—in the mirror image, it has often seemed, of the one that failed them the first time. Together they were “Stalin’s gift to the American Right,” John Patrick Diggins wrote in *Up From Communism* (1975), his account of four writers who exiled themselves from the left and then wandered like restless spirits before finding refuge in the pages of William F. Buckley Jr.’s *National Review* in the 1950s and early 1960s.

In *Exit Right: The People Who Left the Left and Reshaped the American Century*, Daniel Oppenheimer, a writer and a director of communications at the University of Texas at Austin who was born the year after Diggins’s book came out, reprises and updates the history of political defectors. To Oppenheimer’s credit, his own politics, which seem somewhere on the left, don’t intrude on the absorbing stories he tells. He begins with the ex-Communists Whittaker Chambers and James Burnham, then discusses two renouncers of liberalism, Ronald Reagan and Norman Podhoretz, and closes the circle with two casualties of the ’60s–’70s radical left, David Horowitz and Christopher Hitchens. “The ex-believers—the heretics, the apostates—are the problem children of any politics, in any time,” Oppenheimer writes. But the problem, he suggests, isn’t theirs. It’s ours. So quick to denounce or praise, and to demand to be told which side everyone is on, we forget that politics also offers parables of second thoughts and transformation. Ideological changelings, if we catch them mid-flight, remind us that “belief is complicated, contingent, multi-determined.” They can show us, too, “how hard it is to be a person in the world, period, and how much more confusing that task can become when you take on responsibility for repairing or redeeming it.”

Repairing and redeeming set the bar awfully high, and imply a religious mission. This was true enough for Chambers, the Soviet spy turned impassioned anti-Communist, who really did think of himself as Jonah spat

out of the whale: He wrote of his exemplary role, as the accuser in the Alger Hiss spy trial (“the Great Case”), that he had miraculously prevailed “against the powers of the world arrayed almost solidly against” him. But what of the bon vivant Hitchens, who didn’t ever quite leave the left and whose ideological arabesques came in the pages of *The Atlantic*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Nation* and in what he once described as “the guilty companionship of the green room, where rivals forgather to remove makeup and more or less behave as if they all know they’ll be back sometime next week”?

THE DIFFERENCES AREN’T LOST on Oppenheimer. While in principle his subjects offer a model of political engagement, the character of the apostates changes over the course of his narrative, which spans nearly a century. Put most simply, they become less serious, reflecting a broader decline in America’s ideological life. Chambers was a *poète maudit* and an acclaimed literary Bolshevik in the 1920s who then slipped underground to supervise a spy ring that eventually infiltrated the State



In 1948, Whittaker Chambers testified before Congress that Alger Hiss had been in the Communist underground.

Department. Burnham, his contemporary, was a theorist and a leader of the Socialist Workers Party, a favorite subaltern of Leon Trotsky’s when Trotsky was trying to organize the anti-Stalinist revolt from exile in Mexico.

Chambers and Burnham were relatively young men, in their mid-30s, when they gave up the revolution because the facts of the Soviet Union

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had become too ugly to justify. Their withdrawals were principled, agonized, and ennobling, Oppenheimer argues. Each came away from the experience with important lessons to teach. In addition to his eloquent testimony against Hiss, which amounted to a kind of public seminar on underground Communism, Chambers wrote his great memoir, *Witness*. A book of power and harrowing beauty, it is evidence, Oppenheimer believes, that Chambers's "imagination was at its most capacious and subtle only once he had become a conservative." Burnham wrote two classics of mid-century realpolitik—*The Managerial Revolution* and *The Machiavellians*, studies in power and the rise of "elites" (a term he helped popularize)—along with later books on Cold War strategy that were closely read in their day, including by policy makers in the Eisenhower administration.

At the same time, these two men, dissimilar though they were, shared an apocalyptic, even catastrophic, worldview. Chambers notoriously said he had forsaken "the winning side for the losing side," and Burnham, too, seemed in thrall to the revolutionary vision up to the end. The free world was threatened with extinction, and in its blind optimism seemed to welcome doom, while on every side concealed enemies spun the global "web of subversion," as Burnham put it, at home and abroad.

This extremism also showed in other ways, which Oppenheimer doesn't discuss. Chambers's post-exit period included nearly a decade at *Time* magazine, where he became Henry Luce's favorite ideological enforcer, keeping liberal journalists in line during the last stages of World War II, when Cold War tensions were already beginning to surface. Correspondents, including Theodore H. White in China, were shocked to see the facts they had painstakingly gathered in the field fed into Chambers's newly built anti-Communist threshers.

Along with his geopolitical writings, Burnham produced journalism tintured with McCarthyism. In his essay "The Case Against Adlai Stevenson," published in 1952 in *The American Mercury*, the "case" included a dossier on Stevenson's adviser Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "Schlesinger is married to the sister of John K. Fairbank, of Harvard," Burnham wrote.

It would be a cruel thing to hold a man to blame for his brother-in-law. But Schlesinger has taken explicit political as well as personal responsibility for the *bona fides* of Fairbank—of whom it has been testified under oath that he was a member of the Communist Party.

In fact, as Burnham knew very well, Schlesinger was a New Deal Democrat and a co-founder of



Ronald Reagan



David Horowitz



Christopher Hitchens

Americans for Democratic Action, a liberal organization that emphatically excluded Communists. His sin was not being punitively anti-Communist enough for the ex-Communist Burnham.

OPPENHEIMER OMITTS ALL OF this because, I think, he wants us to see these early "ex-believers" at their best and register the contrast with later, more openly self-serving and opportunistic figures. Reagan's apostasy was the first of a new kind, in Oppenheimer's telling—less a fraught reckoning with the forces of history than a canny repositioning keyed to the changing climate. Never enrolled in the revolution, Reagan was a thriving member of Hollywood's liberal left and a longtime leader of the Screen Actors Guild, sometimes tangling with labor activists who didn't grasp, as he did, "the fundamental decency, virtue, and productivity of the American people," Oppenheimer writes. In the 1950s, while still a Democrat but moving rightward, Reagan closely studied *Witness* and *National Review*, whose most august presences were Chambers and Burnham. Reagan combined their teachings with the free-market principles he espoused as a spokesman for General Electric. The result was his uniquely sunny brand of conservative homiletics, which sounded hopeful even when it included dark warnings that Medicare was the first step toward serfdom and would lead to "other federal programs that will invade every area of freedom as we have known it in this country until one day ... we will wake to find that we have socialism." Reagan had an outsize ability, Oppenheimer argues, to "discern the simple truth beneath the surface complexity."

This may sound patronizing. But apostates often cast themselves as pilgrims who have traveled the long, arduous route toward purifying simplicity. Chambers certainly did. So did the ultrasophisticated Podhoretz, a brilliant editor and an accomplished literary critic. "Clarity is courage," he told Oppenheimer in an interview for *Exit Right*. "Everything was simple" once he realized he was a conservative after all. "There was nothing esoteric. There was a simple truth behind everything." This reversed the teachings of his mentor Lionel Trilling, who had himself flirted with radicalism in the 1930s but had come to distrust "the haunted air" of ideology, whether of the left or the right. An English professor at Columbia University, Trilling was the oracle of moral "complexity" and "difficulty"; his own prose exuded nuance and dialectical finesse. He was dismayed when Podhoretz, as the editor of *Commentary*, promoted radical anarchists like Paul Goodman, and was dismayed again when

he read the manuscript of Podhoretz's memoir *Making It* (1967), with its candid self-celebration and its picture of social climbing within the "family" of Manhattan intellectuals. Trilling advised Podhoretz not to publish it, predicting that it would be ruthlessly panned and Podhoretz's reputation would suffer. He was right. Only later, plunged into anguish, did Podhoretz reinterpret the attacks on his book as being covertly, but profoundly, political. His social scorekeeping and odes to success weren't mere lapses of taste. They were an embrace, however tentative, of "middle-class American values," and so were a threat to the "radical party line" followed by Manhattan's literary snobs.

IN THE SPACE OF a generation, from the late 1930s to the late 1960s, we have gone from a revolutionary whose decision to quit the Communist underground involved long months of hiding from possible assassins, to a fixture at Manhattan after-parties whose dark night of the soul began with unfriendly book reviews and being dropped from Jackie Kennedy's guest list. And the descent continues, as the personal doesn't just merge with the political but swallows it whole, and as ideological heresy becomes its own form of postmodern exhibitionism. This brings us to David Horowitz, the former Berkeley radical and *Ramparts* editor whose disenchantment with Bay Area leftism has yielded a franchise that includes the series Black Book of the American Left—volume eight, *The Left in Power (From Clinton to Obama)*, is due out in September—along with varied digital projects. Horowitz runs *FrontPage Magazine* ("Rename the Racist Democratic Party" is a typical feature), the online journal of the David Horowitz Freedom Center, a Web site whose services include listing college campuses friendly to anti-Israel "terrorists."

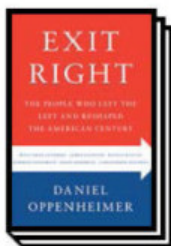
Exit Right ends with a sympathetic but unsparing portrait of the "professional apostate" Christopher Hitchens, who bounded from one crusade to the next. His ardent support for the Iraq invasion in 2003 forced him into awkward collusion with neoconservatives (Podhoretz, for one) whom he had once reviled, and then into hectoring denunciations of critics of the Bush administration even as the war turned bad and the only defenses he could muster were against "the weakest arguments made by the silliest people," in Oppenheimer's estimation.

But Chambers and Burnham stumbled too, and had long histories of misaimed and mistimed zeal. What unites these apostates, in any case, isn't their life experiences, each unlike the others', but

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What unites these apostates isn't their experiences, but the death struggle they brought to politics.



EXIT RIGHT: THE PEOPLE WHO LEFT THE LEFT AND RESHAPED THE AMERICAN CENTURY
DANIEL OPPENHEIMER
Simon & Schuster


the death-struggle atmosphere they brought to politics. Even the genial Reagan favored steamy rhetoric: His "evil empire" is the cartoon version of "the focus of concentrated evil of our time," as Chambers called Communism in *Witness*. Similar formulations are back in vogue today on the right—in the hothouse catchphrases *radical Islamic terrorism* and *clash of civilizations*, and in the casual assertion that President Obama's policies are transparent appeasements that have "betrayed" the nation.

This is the tone of fanaticism—or, perhaps, "the fanatical style," a variation on what Richard Hofstadter called "the paranoid style." Hofstadter was careful to say he was describing not a clinical condition, but a constructed outlook. Its conspiratorial themes grew out of a particular "way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself." So, too, with the current style of conservative discourse. It assumes the presence of concealed enemies, but also stresses, even more than the "paranoiacs" did, the bad faith of liberals who are unwilling and possibly unable to acknowledge how dire things really are—or to call evil by its true name.

A telling moment in the recent history of apostasy came in 1999, when Hitchens, all but maddened with hatred of Bill Clinton and giddy with impeachment fever, swore out an affidavit against the Clinton loyalist Sidney Blumenthal, implicating him in the president's alleged crimes. Hitchens and Blumenthal were old friends, quite like Chambers and Hiss, as many noted at the time. Hitchens himself (cast as Chambers) was delighted by the comparison and its "heroic exaggeration." In fact, it showed how the stakes had changed. The "tragedy of history," in Chambers's famous phrase, spoken during congressional hearings, had been cheapened into sex farce.

Back in 1948, Chambers's accusations against Hiss struck many as unseemly, the ratting-out of a friend, and some suspected hidden motives. At one point, the junior House member leading the investigation, a 35-year-old Richard Nixon, asked Chambers what reason he might have for accusing Hiss. Did he bear him a grudge? "I have testified against him with remorse and pity," Chambers said, but "so help me God, I could not do otherwise." *Remorse* and *pity* are words seldom used in politics today. But they had meaning for the original apostates, who recognized that blame began with themselves, even if it didn't always end there. **■**

Sam Tanenhaus, a contributor to Bloomberg Politics and Bloomberg View, is writing a biography of William F. Buckley Jr.



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BOOKS

The Elusive Maggie Thatcher

Why distorting Mrs. T. has been a popular literary pastime

BY LEO ROBSON

MARGARET THATCHER, though a prodigious consumer of economics textbooks and briefing documents, and a frequent spouter of Bible passages, has been widely considered deaf to literature. Even a besotted admirer like the novelist Anthony Powell found it hard to take her reading seriously. After

Thatcher told him that Dostoyevsky's novel *The Possessed* had helped her understand the pressing problems of the day, he wondered in his journal "when, how, she got round to this. Did she read the novel, see its contemporary relevance herself, or was that pointed out to her by someone? I fear probably the latter." (His skepticism was well founded: The someone was apparently the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge.) In any case, reducing a classic novel to a kind of political how-to guide plays right into the prevailing image of Thatcher among the literary set: someone who, in the writer Jonathan Raban's words, "doesn't appreciate doubleness, contradictions, paradox, irony, ambiguity." One famous anecdote has her pulling out a copy of Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty* at a meeting and pronouncing, "This is what we believe."

Novelists, in turn, invite the charge of being

blinkered about Margaret Thatcher, undispensed to see her except in melodramatic terms. As D. J. Taylor notes in his new book, *The Prose Factory: Literary Life in England Since 1918*, she has been treated as “an almost mythical figure ... for whom the techniques of realist fiction seem sadly inadequate.” Novels about Thatcherism tend toward satire and even farce—Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* being perhaps the classic instance. Novels portraying Thatcher herself veer toward Gothic fantasy: the prime minister as monster, stripped of her name—in *The Satanic Verses*, she is Mrs. Torture—and sometimes of more than that. In Ian McEwan’s *The Child in Time*, we are told about “a convention in the higher reaches of the Civil Service never to reveal, by the use of personal pronouns or other means, any opinion as to the gender of the prime minister.” In *The Line of Beauty*, the winner of the 2004 Man Booker Prize, Alan Hollinghurst achieved a breakthrough, portraying Thatcher as a lightning rod and exploring precisely the extremities of response to which his emotive predecessors had succumbed.

In *High Dive*, the celebrated young British novelist Jonathan Lee puts the prime minister in even clearer perspective. Lee’s third novel, the first to be published in the United States, is a work of social realism that treats the historical Thatcher (variously identified as Maggie, Mrs. T., the Prime Minister, and the Lady) in a balanced rather than partisan way. She gets no walk-on role—unless you count a momentary glimpse of shoes “that could be hers”—but she serves as more than just a screen onto which others project their illusions. Her presence enables Lee’s novel to bypass a crude critique, or cartoon version, of the period in order to portray individual lives floundering and changing in the midst of social and political upheaval. The novel’s epigraph, a few lines from Czesław Miłosz’s poem “Ars Poetica,” that begin “how difficult it is to remain just one person,” signals the literary values of human complexity and fluidity that Lee steers by here.

THE NOVEL UNFOLDS at the Grand Hotel, in Brighton, during the run-up to the 1984 Conservative Party Conference, which was overshadowed—though not interrupted—by an Irish Republican Army bomb that killed two men and three women. Philip Finch, also known as Moose, is the hotel’s unassuming deputy general manager and the divorced father of the disgruntled Freya, who is in the process of deciding whether to apply to university. During her occasional shifts at reception and in the bar, Freya encounters a man who identifies himself as Roy Walsh, but whom the reader knows to be Dan,

Novels about Thatcherism tend toward satire and even farce.



HIGH DIVE
JONATHAN LEE
Knopf

the 24-year-old IRA foot soldier assigned to plant the bomb. Lee moves among the three characters’ perspectives, so that we know more than any one of them does—an effect exacerbated by hindsight.

In an author’s note, Lee says that he has tried to “imagine myself” into the gaps in the historical record. That effort leads him to devote most of the novel to invented characters and to incidents that take place before the bombing, which he saves for very near the end. Lee is interested in Brighton not just as the site of memorable death and destruction, or of imminent death and destruction. He’s intent on social portraiture, evoking a place where people inhabit lives that have registered no seismic wave of Thatcherism—a seaside town in the 1980s, with its customs and rituals. Upon first meeting Freya, we learn how the locals respond to rare days of September sunshine:

They threw off their drizzled raincoats and raided drawers for gaudy shorts. They cooked themselves on towels and bobbed about on waves. Gulls tottered across rocks, heads dipping low and feet lifting high, the motion mirrored by a kid checking his shoe soles for chewing gum.

Navigating between the once-in-a-lifetime and the day-to-day, Lee trains a slyly comic eye on the way that reverie crashes up against mundanity. Moose cares about Thatcher as an aspect of his own ambitions, and though he tells himself to “rein in his excitement” at the prospect of talking to her “at the big drinks function and then again maybe over breakfast,” he also can’t resist imagining the Grand acquiring renown “as the Lady’s favourite hotel—her mentioning it in interviews—and people beginning to call it, colloquially, the Lady Hotel.” Then he decides that it “perhaps wasn’t a good idea, that the Lady Hotel sounded like a cheap King’s Cross brothel.” A mood that begins in airborne fantasy ends on a note of earthbound caution: “You had to be extremely careful, in the hospitality industry, with both names and numbers.” Moose proceeds to remember the tale of a hotel that called a suite the George IV, only to suffer a peeved inquiry about the other three George suites.

If Moose represents the (quickly deflated) view of Thatcher as superwoman—and a route to advancement, and an object of desire—the Irish characters promote the monstrous view of Thatcher, just as readily undercut. One of them sums up her egregious failures of sympathy: “Watching soldiers starve. Being brutal to the poor. Ignoring the north and the west.” Yet in the interplay between Dan and his boss, the IRA taskmaster Dawson McCartland, Lee makes sure to probe the philosophical frailties of their

anti-Thatcher position. Dawson asks Dan during their first encounter whether he's a "fan" of empathy. "I don't know," Dan replies. "I suppose so." Later, Dan appears to settle his moral qualms about republican violence by appealing to an ethical argument: Making politicians feel vulnerable on their own doorstep could mark "the beginning of the end of apathy ... the start of an understanding."

But immediately afterward, Dan admits to enjoying the more banal and brutal thrill of undercover life, "the sprint of adrenaline in your blood" and the relief it brings from other feelings. "There was something nimble about deceit. He tried and failed to remember a time when he'd felt appalled at the thought of it all." And when Dan's doubts return, he realizes that the noble justification he has borrowed from Dawson has a worm of hypocrisy at its center. In the final pages, Dawson talks about Thatcher's "lack of empathy, her inability to imagine herself into other people's shoes." Dan notes that "Dawson did not talk about the victims in the Grand." Lee isn't implying moral equivalence, drawing a neat parallel between the IRA's and the British government's heartlessness. His novel's subtler suggestion is that judging the empathy of others is an elusive exercise—and that speaking the language of empathy is no guarantee that you possess it.

"MARGARET THATCHER HAD nothing to do with real life," thinks Freya Finch, the novel's voice of unillusioned clarity, a perspective that escapes both her father and the terrorists. "Margaret Thatcher was a person other people had made up." Lee agrees, but at the same time takes note of the very real effect of Thatcherism as a domestic force. When Moose suffers a heart attack shortly

The CultureFile

BOOKS

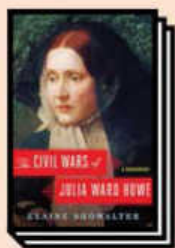
"Margaret Thatcher was a person other people had made up."

before the party conference, Lee observes that because of Thatcher's assault on the unions, he is eligible for only six days' sick pay a year. But instead of dwelling on the irony that a punitive social policy prevents an ill deputy manager of a seaside hotel from recovering fully, the better to prepare for a visit from the author of that policy, Lee permits Moose to remember the benefits of her actions: "It was true, too, that a couple of years ago it was impossible to sack bone-idle staff." Most literary portraits of Thatcher and Thatcherism have done without such "too" sentences.

Lee's novel could have done without the long interlude that fills in a backstory for Moose, a cuckolded middle-aged everyman who turns out to be that very un-English type, the faded jock-god. It's not hard to spot the influence of John Updike's Rabbit and Philip Roth's Swede (from *American Pastoral*) on Lee's fallen athlete. Once "destined for great things"—a champion cricketer, soccer player, runner—"the Finch," as he was known in his glory days, proved to be, in a curious reprise of Freya's verdict on Thatcher, "a character other people had made up," and his promise came to nothing. Lee alludes to Updike's line about giving the mundane its "beautiful due" and makes a number of strained efforts to do so using Updike's tone and manner.

But he had no need to introduce his what-might-have-been subplot or his cut-price version of the American sublime. If only Lee had seen, with his otherwise astute eye, that they would be mere distractions from all the inventive things that he does with Margaret Thatcher and that Margaret Thatcher does for him. **A**

Leo Robson is a regular contributor to the New Statesman.



COVER TO COVER
The Civil Wars of Julia Ward Howe
ELAINE SHOWALTER
SIMON & SCHUSTER

THE STANZAS that made Julia Ward Howe famous came to her during a night at the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C., in 1861, after she had spent the day visiting Union troops. The poem she scribbled down in the predawn darkness went on to enjoy a viral success as yet unmatched by any other verse in *The Atlantic*, where "Battle Hymn of the Republic" appeared in

February 1862.

That bit of triumphant patriotic lore is familiar. Far more fascinating are the personal tribulations that the feminist critic Elaine Showalter probes in her unfailingly vivid—and fair-minded—biography. Domestic power struggles made the Howes' marital union an unending misery. Howe's domineering husband—Samuel Gridley Howe,

renowned for working miracles with Laura Bridgman at the Perkins Institution for the Blind—did everything he could to impede his wife's quest for creative freedom.

She wrote anyway and, without warning him, published now-forgotten poems that exposed, and fueled, their strife. As an appalled Nathaniel Hawthorne said, these other battle

hymns "seemed to let out a whole history of domestic unhappiness." In one of them—about a millstream that a proud miller couldn't tame (the parable was obvious)—Howe made history again when she burst into slang: "Wow! but it wrought its will." Howe, Showalter discovers, was evidently the first writer outside of Scotland to use the word *wow*.

—Ann Hulbert

MY MOTHER WAS A SNEAKER, MY FATHER WAS A DRESS SHOE



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What's behind the surge in
American teens who are highly
fluent in high-order math

By
**PEG
TYRE**

The Math Revolution



An end-of-semester board-game party in Manhattan for students of the Bridge to Enter Advanced Mathematics program. BEAM teaches New York City kids from low-income communities to view math as exploration.



Photographs by
ERIN PATRICE O'BRIEN

On

tro tables, talking in low voices and obsessively refreshing the browsers on their laptops. The air in the cavernous lobby of the Lotus Hotel Pang Suan Kaew in Chiang Mai, Thailand, was humid, recalls Stoner, whose light South Carolina accent warms his carefully chosen words. The tension in the room made it seem especially heavy, like the atmosphere at a high-stakes poker tournament.

Stoner and five teammates were representing the United States in the 56th International Mathematical Olympiad. They figured they'd done *pretty* well over the two days of competition. God knows, they'd trained hard. Stoner, like his teammates, had endured a grueling regime for more than a year—practicing tricky problems over breakfast before school and taking on more problems late into the evening after he completed the homework for his college-level math classes. Sometimes, he sketched out proofs on the large dry-erase board his dad had installed in his bedroom. Most nights, he put himself to sleep reading books like *New Problems in Euclidean Geometry* and *An Introduction to Diophantine Equations*.

Still, it was hard to know how his team had stacked up against those from the perennial powers China, Russia, and South Korea. "I mean, the gold? Did we do well enough to get the gold?" he said. "At that moment, it was hard to say." Suddenly, there was a shout from a team across the lobby, then a collective intake of breath as the Olympians surged closer to their laptops. As Stoner tried to absorb what he saw on his own computer screen, the noise level in the lobby grew from a buzz to a cheer. Then one of his team members gave a whoop that ended in the chant "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!", and the smattering of applause from the other Olympians grew more robust, and finally thunderous. Beaming, one of Stoner's teammates pulled a small American flag out of his backpack and began waving it. Stoner was grinning. For the first time in 21 years, the United States team had won first place. Speaking last fall from his dorm at Harvard, where he is now a freshman, Stoner recalled his team's triumph with quiet satisfaction. "It was a really great moment. Really great. Especially if you love math."

It also wasn't an aberration. You wouldn't see it in most classrooms, you wouldn't know it by looking at slumping national test-score averages, but a cadre of American teenagers are reaching world-class heights in math—more of them, more regularly, than ever before. The phenomenon extends well beyond the handful of hopefuls for the Math Olympiad. The students are being produced by a new pedagogical ecosystem—almost entirely extracurricular—that has developed online and in the country's rich coastal cities and tech meccas. In these places, accelerated students are learning more and learning faster than

a sultry evening last July, a tall, soft-spoken 17-year-old named David Stoner and nearly 600 other math whizzes from all over the world sat huddled in small groups around wicker bis-

they were 10 years ago—tackling more-complex material than many people in the advanced-math community had thought possible. "The bench of American teens who can do world-class math," says Po-Shen Loh, the head coach of the U.S. team, "is significantly wider and stronger than it used to be."

The change is palpable at the most competitive colleges. At a time when calls for a kind of academic disarmament have begun echoing through affluent communities around the nation, a faction of students are moving in exactly the opposite direction. "More freshmen arrive at elite colleges with exposure to math topics well outside of what has traditionally been taught in American high schools," says Loh. "For American students who have an appetite to learn math at a high level," says Paul Zeitz, a mathematics professor at the University of San Francisco, "something very big is happening. It's very dramatic and it's happening very fast."

In the past, a small number of high-school students might have attended rigorous and highly selective national summer math camps like Hampshire College's Summer Studies in Mathematics, in Massachusetts, or the Ross Mathematics Program at Ohio State, both of which have been around for decades. But lately, dozens of new math-enrichment camps with names like MathPath, AwesomeMath, MathILy, Idea Math, SPARC, Math Zoom, and Epsilon Camp have popped up, opening the gates more widely to kids who have aptitude and enthusiasm for math, but aren't necessarily prodigies. In Silicon Valley and the Bay Area, math circles—some run by tiny nonprofit organizations or a single professor, and offering small groups of middle- and high-school math buffs a chance to tackle problems under the guidance of graduate students, teachers, professors, engineers, and software designers—now

have long wait lists. In New York City last fall, it was easier to get a ticket to the hit musical *Hamilton* than to enroll your child in certain math circles. Some circles in the 350-student program run out of New York University filled up in about five hours.

Math competitions are growing in number and popularity too. The number of U.S. participants in Math Kangaroo, an international contest for first- through 12th-graders that came to American shores in 1998, grew from 2,576 in 2009 to 21,059 in 2015. More than 10,000 middle- and high-school

students haunt chat rooms, buy textbooks, and take classes on the advanced-math learners' Web site the Art of Problem Solving. This fall, the Art of Problem Solving's founder, Richard Rusczyk, a former Math Olympian who left his job in finance 18 years ago, will open two brick-and-mortar centers in the Raleigh, North Carolina, and Rockville, Maryland, areas, with a focus on advanced math. An online program for elementary-school students will follow. Last fall, Zeitz—along with another math professor, a teacher, and a private-equity manager—opened the Proof School, a small independent secondary school in San Francisco similarly centered on amped-up math. Before the inaugural school year even began, school officials were fielding inquiries from parents wondering when a Proof School would be opening on the East Coast and

"For American students who have an appetite to learn math at a high level, something very big is happening."



Break time at a Sunday class in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, held by the Russian School of Mathematics, which enrolls some 17,500 students nationwide. One of the school's co-founders, a former mechanical engineer in the Soviet Union, believes math education in the U.S. begins to go wrong as early as second or third grade.

whether they could get their child on a waiting list. “The appetite among families for this kind of math instruction,” Rusczyk says, “seems boundless.”

Parents of students in the accelerated-math community, many of whom make their living in STEM fields, have enrolled their children in one or more of these programs to supplement or replace what they see as the shallow and often confused math instruction offered by public schools, especially during the late-elementary and middle-school years. They have reason to do so. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, much of the growth in our domestic economy will come from STEM-related jobs, some of which are extremely well paid. College freshmen have heard that message; the number who say they want to major in a STEM field is up. But attrition rates are very high: Between 2003 and 2009, 48 percent of students pursuing a bachelor’s degree in a STEM field switched to another major or dropped out—many found they simply didn’t have the quantitative background they needed to succeed.

The roots of this failure can usually be traced back to second or third grade, says Inessa Rifkin, a co-founder of the Russian School of Mathematics, which this year enrolled 17,500 students in after-school and weekend math academies in 31 locations around the United States. In those grades, many education experts lament, instruction—even at the best schools—is provided by poorly trained teachers who are themselves uncomfortable with math. In 1997, Rifkin, who once worked as a mechanical engineer in the Soviet Union, saw this firsthand. Her children, who attended public school in affluent Newton,

Massachusetts, were being taught to solve problems by memorizing rules and then following them like steps in a recipe, without understanding the bigger picture. “I’d look over their homework, and what I was seeing, it didn’t look like they were being taught math,” recalls Rifkin, who speaks emphatically, with a heavy Russian accent. “I’d say to my children, ‘Forget the rules! Just think!’ And they’d say, ‘That’s not how they teach it here. That’s not what the teacher wants us to do.’” That year, she and Irina Khavinson, a gifted math teacher she knew, founded the Russian School around her dining-room table.

Teachers at the Russian School help students achieve fluency in arithmetic, the fundamentals of algebra and geometry, and later, higher-order math. At every level, and with increasing intensity as they get older, students are required to think their way through logic problems that can be resolved only with creative use of the math they’ve learned.

One chilly December Sunday at a school in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, seven second-graders filed past a glossy poster showing Russian School students who had recently medaled in math competitions. They settled into their seats as their teacher, Irine Rober, showed them conceptual examples of addition and subtraction by ripping paper in half and by adding weights to each side of a scale to balance it. Simple stuff. Then the students took turns coming to the blackboard to explain how they’d used addition and subtraction to solve an equation for x , which required a bit more thinking. After a brief break, Rober asked each child to come up with a narrative that explained what the expression $49 + (18 - 3)$ means. The children



BEAM participants are selected for their strong reasoning, stamina, and communication skills—and also for the pleasure they take in solving complicated problems. Clockwise from bottom left: New York City eighth-, ninth-, and 10th-graders Zyan Espinal, Jontae Martin, Jezebel Gomez, Nazmul Hoq, Aicha Keita, and William Laurence. Bottom center: staff member Oksana James.

invented stories involving fruit, the shedding and growing of teeth, and, to the amusement of all, toilet monsters.

Although the students were laughing, there was nothing superficial or perfunctory about their explanations. Rober and her class listened carefully to the logic embedded in each of the stories. When one young boy, Shawn, got tangled up in his reasoning, Rober was quick to point to the exact spot where his thinking went awry (in the enthusiastic telling of a tale about farmers, bountiful harvests, and apple-eating varmints, Shawn began by talking about what happened to the 49 apples, when the order of operations demanded that he first describe a reduction in the 18 apples). Rober gently set him straight. Later, the children told stories about $49-(18+3)$ and $49-(18-3)$ too.

Rifkin trains her teachers to expect challenging questions from students at every level, even from pupils as young as 5, so lessons toggle back and forth between the obvious and the mind-bendingly abstract. “The youngest ones, very naturally,

their minds see math differently,” she told me. “It is common that they can ask simple questions and then, in the next minute, a very complicated one. But if the teacher doesn’t know enough mathematics, she will answer the simple question and shut down the other, more difficult one. We want children to ask difficult questions, to engage so it is not boring, to be able to do algebra at an early age, sure, but also to see it for what it is: a tool for critical thinking. If their teachers can’t help them do this, well—” Rifkin searched for the word that expressed her level of dismay. “It is a betrayal.”

For a subject that has been around almost as long as civilization itself, there remains a surprising degree of contention among experts about how best to teach math. Fiery battles have been waged for decades over what gets taught, in what order, why, and how. Broadly speaking, there have been two opposing camps. On one side are those who favor

conceptual knowledge—understanding how math relates to the world—over rote memorization and what they call “drill and kill.” (Some well-respected math-instruction gurus say that memorizing anything in math is counterproductive and stifles the love of learning.) On the other side are those who say memorization of multiplication tables and the like is necessary for efficient computation. They say teaching students the rules and procedures that govern math forms the bedrock of good instruction and sophisticated mathematical thinking. They bristle at the phrase *drill and kill* and prefer to call it simply “practice.”

The Common Core State Standards Initiative walks a narrow path through that minefield, calling for teachers to place equal importance on “mathematical understanding” and “procedural skills.” It’s too early to know what effect the initiative will have. To be sure, though, most students today aren’t learning much math: Only 40 percent of fourth-graders and 33 percent of eighth-graders are considered at least “proficient.” On an internationally administered test in 2012, just 9 percent of 15-year-olds in the United States were rated “high scorers” in math, compared with 16 percent in Canada, 17 percent in Germany, 21 percent in Switzerland, 31 percent in South Korea, and 40 percent in Singapore.

The new outside-of-school math programs like the Russian School vary in their curricula and teaching methods, but they have key elements in common. Perhaps the most salient is the emphasis on teaching students to think about math conceptually and then use that conceptual knowledge as a tool to predict, explore, and explain the world around them. There is a dearth of rote learning and not much time spent applying a list of memorized formulas.

Computational speed is not a virtue. (“Cram schools,” featuring a mechanistic, test-prep approach to learning math, have become common in some immigrant communities, and plenty of tutors of affluent children use this approach as well, but it is the opposite of what’s taught in this new type of accelerated-learning program.) To keep pace with their classmates, students quickly learn their math facts and formulas, but that is more a by-product than the point.

The pedagogical strategy at the heart of the classes is loosely referred to as “problem solving,” a pedestrian term that undersells just how different this approach to math can be. The problem-solving approach has long been a staple of math education in the countries of the former Soviet Union and at elite colleges such as MIT and Cal Tech. It works like this: Instructors present small clusters of students, usually grouped by ability, with a small number of open-ended, multifaceted situations that can be solved by using different approaches.

Here’s an example from the nascent math-and-science site Expii.com:

Imagine a rope that runs completely around the Earth’s equator, flat against the ground (assume the Earth is a perfect sphere, without any mountains or valleys). You cut the rope and tie in another piece of rope that is 710 inches long, or just under 60 feet. That increases the total length of the rope by a bit more than the length of a bus, or the height of

a 5-story building. Now imagine that the rope is lifted at all points simultaneously, so that it floats above the Earth at the same height all along its length. What is the largest thing that could fit underneath the rope?

The options given are bacteria, a ladybug, a dog, Einstein, a giraffe, or a space shuttle. The instructor then coaches all the students as they reason their way through. Unlike most math classes, where teachers struggle to impart knowledge to students—who must passively absorb it and then regurgitate it on a test—problem-solving classes demand that the pupils execute the cognitive bench press: investigating, conjecturing, predicting, analyzing, and finally verifying their own mathematical strategy. The point is not to accurately execute algorithms, although there is, of course, a right answer (Einstein, in the problem above). Truly thinking the problem through—creatively applying what you know about math and puzzling out possible solutions—is more important. Sitting in a regular ninth-grade algebra class versus observing a middle-school

problem-solving class is like watching kids get lectured on the basics of musical notation versus hearing them sing an aria from *Tosca*.

In my experience, a common emotion in the NYU math circles, at the Russian School, in the chat rooms of the Art of Problem Solving and similar Web sites, is authentic excitement—among the students, but also among the teachers—about the subject itself. Even in the very early grades, instructors tend to be deeply knowledgeable and passionately engaged. “Many of them are working in the fields that use math—chemistry, meteorology, and

engineering—and teach part-time,” Rifkin says. They are people who themselves find the subject approachable and deeply interesting, and they are encouraged to convey that.

But excitement aside, the pedagogy is very deliberate. At the Russian School, lessons are carefully structured and each teacher’s lesson plan is reviewed and revised by a mentor. Instructors watch videos of master teachers deftly helping to clear up students’ misunderstandings of particular concepts. Teachers gather by videoconference to critique one another’s instructional technique.

Many of these programs—especially the camps, competitions, and math circles—create a unique culture and a strong sense of belonging for students who have a zest for the subject but all the awkwardness and uneven development of the typical adolescent. “When I attended my first math competition,” at age 11, “I understood for the first time that my tribe was out there,” said David Stoner, who joined a math circle a year later, and soon thereafter became a habitué of the Art of Problem Solving. Freewheeling collaboration across age, gender, and geography is a baseline value. Although the accelerated-math community has historically been largely male, girls are getting involved in increasing numbers, and making their presence felt. Kids blow off steam by playing strategy board games like *Dominion* and *Settlers of Catan*, or “bug house” chess, a high-speed, multiboard variation of the old standby. Insider humor

Children should see math “for what it is: a tool for critical thinking. If their teachers can’t help them do this, well—it is a betrayal.”

abounds. A typical T-shirt slogan: $\sqrt{-1} \ 2^3 \sum \pi \dots$ AND IT WAS DELICIOUS! (Translation: “I ate some pie ...”) At the Math Olympiad Summer Program, a training ground for future Olympians, one of the acts in the talent show last June involved a group of youngsters developing computer code while holding a plank pose.

The students speak about career ambitions with a rare degree of assurance. Problem-solving for fun, they know, leads to problem-solving for profit. The link can be very direct: Some of the most recognizable companies in the tech industry regularly prospect, for instance, on Brilliant.org, an advanced-math-community Web site launched in San Francisco in 2012. “Money follows math” is a common refrain.

Although efforts are under way on many fronts to improve math education in public schools using some of the techniques found in these enriched classes, measurable gains in learning have proved elusive.

Nearly everyone in the accelerated-math community says that the push to cultivate sophisticated math minds needs to start early and encompass plenty of thoughtful, conceptual learning experiences in elementary and middle school. The proportion of American students who can do math at a very high level could be much larger than it is today. “Will they all learn it at the same rate? No, they will not,” says Loh, the U.S. math team’s head coach. “But I assure you that with the right instruction and steady effort, many, many more American students could get there.”

Students who show an inclination toward math need additional math opportunities—and a chance to be around other math enthusiasts—in the same way that a kid adept with a soccer ball might eventually need to join a traveling team. And earlier is better than later: The subject is relentlessly sequential and hierarchical. “If you wait until high school to attempt to produce accelerated math learners,” Loh told me, “the latecomers will find themselves missing too much foundational thinking and will struggle, with only four short years before college, to catch up.” These days, it is a rare student who can move from being “good at math” in a regular public high school to finding a place in the advanced-math community.

All of which creates a formidable barrier. Most middle-class parents might research sports programs and summer camps for their 8- and 9-year-old children, but would rarely think of supplemental math unless their kid is struggling. “You have to know about these programs, live in a neighborhood that has these resources, or at least know where to look,” says Sue Khim, a co-founder of Brilliant.org. And since many of the programs are private, they are well out of reach for the poor. (A semester in a math circle can cost about \$300, a year at a Russian School up to \$3,000, and four weeks in a residential math program perhaps twice that.) National achievement data reflect this access gap in math instruction all too clearly. The ratio of rich math whizzes to poor ones is 3 to 1 in South Korea and 3.7 to 1 in Canada, to take two representative developed countries. In the U.S., it is 8 to 1. And while the proportion of American students scoring at advanced levels in math is rising, those

gains are almost entirely limited to the children of the highly educated, and largely exclude the children of the poor. By the end of high school, the percentage of low-income advanced-math learners rounds to zero.

To Daniel Zaharopol, the founder and executive director of Bridge to Enter Advanced Mathematics (BEAM), a nonprofit organization based in New York City, the short-term solution is logical. “We know that math ability is universal and interest in math is spread pretty much equally through the population,” he says, “and we see there are almost no low-income, high-performing math students. So we know that there are many, many students who have the potential for high achievement in math but who have not had opportunity to develop their math minds, simply because they were born to the wrong parents or in the wrong zip code. We want to find them.”

In an experiment that is being closely watched by educators and members of the advanced-math community, Zaharopol, who majored in math at MIT before getting a master’s in math and teaching math, spends each spring visiting middle schools in New York City that serve low-income kids. He is prospecting for students who, with the right instruction and some support, can take their place, if not at the International Math Olympiad,



Daniel Zaharopol (right), the founder and executive director of BEAM, believes that far too many low- and middle-income kids are being left out of the advanced-learning revolution.

then at a less selective competition, and in a math circle, and eventually at a STEM program at a competitive college.

Zaharopol doesn’t look for the best all-around students to admit to his program, which provides the kind of comprehensive support that wealthy math nerds get: a three-week residential math camp the summer before eighth grade, enhanced instruction after school, help with applying to math circles, and coaching for math competitions, as well as basic advice on high-school selection and college applications. Those who get perfect grades in math are interesting to him, but only to a point. “They don’t have to like school or even like math class,” he says. Instead, he is looking for kids with a confluence of specific abilities: strong reasoning, lucid communication, stamina. A fourth, more ineffable quality is crucial: “I look for kids who take pleasure in resolving complicated problems,” Zaharopol

says. “Actually doing math should bring them joy.”

Five years ago, when Zaharopol entered M.S. 343, a boxy-looking building in a rough section of the South Bronx, and sat down with a seventh-grader, Xavier Jenkins, who had a big smile and a Mohawk, nothing about the setup was auspicious. With just 13 percent of kids performing at grade level in English and 57 percent in math, M.S. 343 seemed an unlikely incubator for tomorrow’s tech mogul or medical engineer.

But in a quiet conversation, Zaharopol learned that Jenkins had what his siblings and peers considered a quirky affinity for patterns and an inclination toward numbers. Lately, Jenkins confided to Zaharopol, a certain frustration had set in. He could complete his math assignments accurately, but he was growing bored.

Zaharopol asked Jenkins to do some simple computations, which he handled with ease. Then Zaharopol threw a puzzle at Jenkins and waited to see what would happen:

You have a drawer full of socks, each one of which is red, white, or blue. You start taking socks out without looking at them. How many socks do you need to take out of the drawer to be sure you have taken out at least two socks that are the same color?

“For the first time, I was presented with a math problem that didn’t have an easy answer,” Jenkins recalls. At first, he simply multiplied two by three to get six socks. Dissatisfied, he began sifting through other strategies.

“I was very encouraged by that,” Zaharopol told me. “Many kids just assume they have the right answer.” After a few minutes, he offered to show Jenkins one way to reason through the problem. The energy in the room changed. “Not only did Xavier come up with the right answer”—four—“but he really understood it very thoroughly,” Zaharopol said. “And he seemed to take delight in the experience.” Four months later, Jenkins was living with 16 other rising eighth-graders in a dorm at the BEAM summer program on Bard College’s campus in upstate New York, being coached on number theory, recursion, and graph theory by math majors, math teachers, and math professors from top universities around the country. With some counseling from BEAM, he entered a coding program, which led to an internship at Microsoft. Now a high-school senior, he has applied to some of the top engineering schools in the country.

BEAM, which is five years old, has already quadrupled in size—it hosted 80 middle-school students at its summer program last year and has about 250 low-income, high-performing students in its network. But its funding remains limited. “We know there are many, many more low-income kids who we don’t reach and who simply don’t have access to these programs,” Zaharopol said.

There is already a name for the kind of initiative that might, in part, bring the benefits of BEAM, math circles, the Russian School, or the Art of Problem Solving to a broader array of students, including middle- and low-income ones: gifted-and-talented programs, which are publicly funded and can start in elementary school. But the history of these programs is fraught. Admission criteria vary, but they have tended to favor affluent children. Teachers can be lobbied for a recommendation; some standardized entry tests measure vocabulary and general knowledge, not creative

reasoning. In some places, parents pay for their children to be tutored for the admission exam, or even privately tested to get in.

As a result, while many such programs still exist, they’ve been increasingly spurned by equity-minded school administrators and policy makers who see them as a means by which predominately affluent white and Asian parents have funneled scarce public dollars toward additional enrichment for their already enriched children. (The vaguely obnoxious label itself—“gifted and talented”—hasn’t helped matters.)

The No Child Left Behind Act, which shaped education for nearly 15 years, further contributed to the neglect of these programs. Ignoring kids who may have had aptitude or interest in accelerated learning, it demanded that states turn their attention to getting struggling learners to perform adequately—a noble goal. But as a result, for years many educators in schools in poor neighborhoods, laser-focused on the low-achieving kids, dismissed suggestions that the minds of their brightest kids were lying fallow. Some denied that their schools had any gifted children at all.

The cumulative effect of these actions, perversely, has been to push accelerated learning outside public schools—to privatize it, focusing it even more tightly on children whose parents have the money and wherewithal to take advantage. In no subject is that clearer today than in math.

The good news is that education policy may be beginning to swing back. Federal and state legislators increasingly seem to agree that all teenagers could benefit from the kind of accelerated-learning opportunities once reserved for high-aptitude kids in affluent neighborhoods, and many public high schools have been pushed to offer more Advanced Placement classes and to expand enrollment in online college courses. But for many middle- and low-income students who might have learned to love math, those opportunities come too late.

Perhaps it is a hopeful sign, then, that the newly authorized Every Student Succeeds Act, which recently replaced No Child Left Behind, asks states to recognize that such students can exist in every precinct, and to track their progress. For the first time in the nation’s history, the law also explicitly allows schools to use federal dollars to experiment with ways of screening for low-income, high-ability students in the early years and to train teachers to serve them. Universal screening in elementary school might be a good start. From 2005 to 2007, school officials in Broward County, Florida, concerned that poor kids and English-language learners were being under-referred to gifted programs, gave all second-graders, rich and poor, a nonverbal reasoning test, and the high scorers an IQ test. The criteria for “gifted” status weren’t weakened, but the number of disadvantaged children identified as having the capacity for accelerated learning rose 180 percent.

Whether individual states take up this challenge, and do so effectively, is their decision, but advocates say they are mounting a campaign to get started. Perhaps the moment is right for members of the advanced-math community, who have been so successful in developing young math minds, to step in and show more educators how it could be done. **A**

*Peg Tyre is the director of strategy at the Edwin Gould Foundation and the author of *The Good School: How Smart Parents Get Their Kids the Education They Deserve*.*

How America Is Putting

Most Americans believe
the country is going
to hell. They're wrong.

What a three-year journey
by single-engine plane
reveals about reinvention
and renewal—and about
how the Second Gilded
Age might end.



WHEN NEWS BROKE late last year of a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California, most people in the rest of the country, and even the state, probably had to search a map to figure out where the city was. I knew exactly, having grown up in the next-door town of Redlands (where the two killers lived) and having, by chance, spent a long period earlier in the year meeting and interviewing people in the unglamorous “Inland Empire” of Southern California as part of an ongoing project of reporting across America.

Some of what my wife, Deb, and I heard in San Bernardino before the shootings closely matched the picture that the non-stop news coverage presented afterward: San Bernardino as a poor, troubled town that sadly managed to combine nearly

every destructive economic, political, and social trend of the country as a whole. San Bernardino went into bankruptcy in 2012 and was only beginning to emerge at the time of the shootings. Crime is high, household income is low, the downtown is nearly abandoned in the daytime and dangerous at night, and unemployment and welfare rates are persistently the worst in the state.

So if you wanted a symbol of what conservative politicians like Donald Trump or Ted Cruz mean when they talk about American decay, what liberal writers like George Packer or Robert Putnam mean when describing America’s unraveling, San Bernardino would serve—and it did, in most of the reports after the shooting.

But that was not the only thing, or even the most interesting

Itself Back Together

By
**JAMES
FALLOWS**



thing, that we saw during our time there. If “news” is what you didn’t know before you went to look, the news of San Bernardino, from our perspective, was not the unraveling but the reverse. The familiar background was the long decline. The surprise was how wide a range of people, of different generations and races and political outlooks, believed that the city was on the upswing, and that their own efforts could help speed that trend.

For instance: Last spring we met a group of San Bernardinians in their 20s and early 30s who called themselves Generation Now—San Bernardino. They were white, black, and Latino. (The city is about 60 percent Latino, 20 percent white, the rest black or Asian.) Some had finished college, some were still studying, some had not gone to college. They worked

as artists or accountants or in part-time jobs. But all were involved in what you could call a raveling-up of the town’s tattered social fabric.

“I was just pissed off,” an artist in his 20s named Michael Segura told us. “By the time I was old enough to vote, everything was in such terrible shape in San Bernardino. We just heard all the time that it’s a city of losers. We’d had enough.” In early 2013, just after the city declared bankruptcy and appeared to be at the depth of its hopelessness, he and a handful of friends began efforts to engage the city’s generally disaffected residents in improving their collective future.

Voter-turnout rates were among the lowest in the state, especially in poor and heavily Latino precincts; Generation Now members encouraged their neighbors to show up for

civic sessions and register to vote. The numerous foreclosed homes and shuttered storefronts gave great stretches of San Bernardino a war-zone look; artists in the group covered some of the buildings with murals. Other members organized park-cleanup days, removing needles and trash, and replanting bushes and grass. Soon, neighborhood kids were following them around, cleaning up alongside them.

From a distance, the San Bernardino story is of wall-to-wall failure. From the inside, the story includes rapidly progressing civic and individual reinvention. One illustration is a prosperous Air Force veteran turned aerospace engineer named Mike Gallo. Five years ago, he decided to run for the board in charge of the city's chronically troubled, low-scoring schools. Why? "These kids deserve a better chance, and we can help them get it," he told me. It sounds formulaic, but teachers, students, and politicians said that Gallo's hard-charging, Teddy Roosevelt-style energy and effort had helped the schools begin a turnaround. He is now the board's president.

Another illustration is his colleague Bill Clarke, who worked as a trainer and manager for General Dynamics and then had a career teaching manufacturing skills in local public schools. Five years ago, when he retired, he and Gallo set up a nonprofit technical school for unskilled locals, and intensified training programs in the public schools, whose students are mainly from poor households. In these programs, the students learn to use and repair the machinery that defines the advanced-manufacturing age: 3-D printers, robots, and enormous CNC (computer numerically controlled) machine-tool systems. "We're training them on real machines, with real national-level certification, for good real-world jobs that really exist," Clarke told me in the machine shop at his nonprofit school, beneath a banner saying WE ARE MAKING AMERICA GREAT IN MANUFACTURING AGAIN. Since 2010, he said, more than 400 students had passed through the school "right into the high-tech manufacturing world." This was going on in the same city that was blanketed by reporters from around the world for several weeks. They did a thorough job on one particular story in San Bernardino, but more was happening.

As a whole, the country may seem to be going to hell. That jeremiad view is a great constant through American history. The sentiment is predictably and particularly strong in a presidential-election year like this one, when the "out" party always has a reason to argue that things are bad and getting worse. And plenty of objective indicators of trouble, from stagnant median wages to drug epidemics in rural America to gun deaths inflicted by law-enforcement officers and civilians, support the dystopian case.

But here is what I now know about America that I didn't know when we started these travels, and that I think almost no one would infer from the normal diet of news coverage and political discourse. The discouraging parts of the San Bernardino story are exceptional—only five other U.S. cities are officially bankrupt—but the encouraging parts have resonance almost anywhere else you look. Mike Gallo and Bill Clarke are politically conservative and, as I heard from

Clarke in particular, they share the current GOP pessimism about trends for the country as a whole. But they both feel encouraged about the collaborative efforts on education reform under way right now in their own town. What is true for this very hard-luck city prevails more generally: Many people are discouraged by what they hear and read about America, but the closer they are to the action at home, the better they like what they see.

What Americans have heard and read about the country since Deb and I started our travels is the familiar chronicle of stagnation and strain. The kinds of things we have seen make us believe that the real news includes a process of revival and reinvention that has largely if understandably been overlooked in the political and media concentration on the strains of this Second Gilded Age.

"In scores of ways, Americans are figuring out how to take advantage of the opportunities of this era, often through bypassing or ignoring the dismal national conversation," Philip Zelickow, a professor at the University of Virginia and a director of a recent Markle Foundation initiative called "Rework America," told me. "There are a lot of more positive narratives out there—but they're lonely, and disconnected.

It would make a difference to join them together, as a chorus that has a melody."

This is the alternative melody we would like to introduce.

**MANY PEOPLE ARE
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BUT THE CLOSER
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THEY SEE.**

IN EARLY 2013, I placed a short item on *The Atlantic's* Web site asking for advice from readers about cities of a certain type. We wanted to hear about cities whose recent dramas might reveal something about the economic and cultural resilience of the United States. I asked about cities that had suffered some kind of economic, political, environmental, or other hardship during the financial crash or earlier, and whose response was

instructive in either good or bad ways. I said we were looking for "smaller" cities, by which I really meant anything less famous than the big stylish centers of the East and West Coasts. I also said that we definitely were not looking for the merely "quaint," the kitschy touches of Americana such as the little town showcasing the world's largest ball of twine. Nor were we looking for "undiscovered gems" or entries on a list of ideal low-budget retirement sites. Rather we hoped to treat seriously parts of fly-over territory that usually made the news only after a natural or man-made disaster, or as primary-campaign or swing-state locations during presidential-election years.

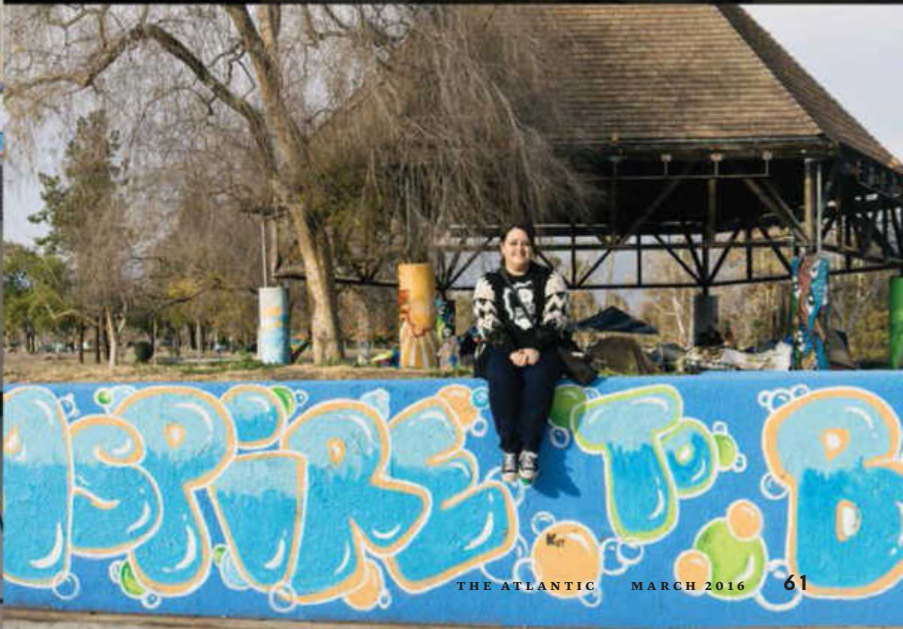
In the end we got more than 1,000 responses—nearly 700 within a few days!—including several hundred making an extended case for the significance of what had happened in the writer's town. Suggestions have kept coming in. The knowledge that I cannot possibly ever see most of the places I've now read about makes me surprisingly sad. But we've been steadily visiting as many as we can. So far we have had extended, repeat-visit exposure (usually totaling 10 days to two weeks) to two dozen cities and towns all around the country, and shorter sessions in two dozen more.

There is a high-toned tradition of road trips as a means



SAN BERNARDINO REINVENTION

Clockwise, from top left: Tay DuBois (with his daughter), an artist who has worked with Generation Now, a group of young activists who have created murals and are cleaning and replanting parks; Gloria Macías Harrison at the Garcia Center for the Arts, on whose board she serves; Mike Gallo, who as school-board president is helping change the city's low-scoring schools; Elizabeth Flores, of Generation Now, on one of the group's murals; Bill Clarke, who runs a nonprofit school teaching advanced manufacturing skills; a gallery at the arts center.



of “discovering” America, from Lewis and Clark and Tocqueville through John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and William Least Heat Moon (whose *Blue Highways* made its debut in these pages). Apart from other obvious points of contrast, our project was different in that rather than going by car (or wagon, or pirogue), we’ve gone from city to city in our family’s small single-engine propeller airplane, a Cirrus SR22. This was a decision made for convenience, for beauty, and for edification.

The convenience comes from the simple fact that almost any settlement in America is within close range of a place where a small airplane can land. Some 5,000 public airports, many of them built for military purposes during and after World War II, are scattered about the U.S., making many remote hamlets more easily reachable by air than by other means.

The beauty comes from the privilege and unending fascination of watching the American landscape unfurl below as you travel at low altitude. At the dawn of powered flight, a century ago, it was assumed that writers and painters would want to become aviators, and vice versa—Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, and Ernest K. Gann were fliers who wrote; Beryl Markham, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and Anne Morrow Lindbergh were writers who flew—because of the unique perspective on civilization and nature offered by the aerial view. The late novelist James Salter, who was a Korean War fighter pilot and retained his passion for flight, was a mid-century example; William Langewiesche, a longtime *Atlantic* writer (and the son of Wolfgang Langewiesche, whose *Stick and Rudder* is the flying world’s equivalent of *The Elements of Style*) is a current one.

A coast-to-coast drive across America has its tedious stretches, and the teeming interstate corridors, from I-95 in the east to I-5 in the west, can lead to the despairing conclusion that the country is made of gas stations, burger stands, and big-box malls. From only 2,500 feet higher up, the interstates look like ribbons that trace narrow paths across landscape that is mostly far beyond the reach of any road. From ground level, America is mainly road—after all, that’s where cars can take you. From the sky, America is mainly forest in the eastern third, farmland



Starting with a flight to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in 2013, through a trip to Mississippi last fall, James and Deborah Fallows made extended visits to two dozen cities, and shorter stops in another two dozen, covering a total of 54,000 miles in their single-engine propeller airplane. The longest swing was from November 2014, when they left Washington for the West Coast—with stops in West Virginia, Kentucky, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Arizona—until the following July, when they returned via Montana, Colorado, Nebraska, and Ohio.

in the middle, then mountain and desert in the west, before the strip of intense development along the California coast. It’s also full of features obvious from the sky that are much harder to notice from the ground (and difficult to pick out from six miles up in an airliner): quarries at the edge of most towns, to provide gravel for roads and construction sites; prisons, instantly identifiable by their fencing (though some mega high schools can look similar), usually miles from the nearest town or tucked in locations where normal traffic won’t pass by. I never tire of the view from this height, as different from the normal, grim airliner perspective as scuba diving is from traveling on a container ship.

The edification comes from lessons in history, geography, urban planning, and environmental protection and despoliation that are inescapably obvious from above. Why is St. Louis where it is? Ah, of course! It’s where the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers come together. Why were mill towns built along the fall line of the Appalachians? Because of the long north-to-south series of waterfalls. As you cross South Dakota from east to west, from the big city of Sioux Falls at the Iowa and Minnesota borders toward Rapid City and the Black Hills and beyond, you can see the terrain change sharply. In the East River portion of the state, between Sioux Falls and the Missouri, you see flat, well-watered farmlands and small farming towns. Then past Pierre

ELEVEN SIGNS A CITY WILL SUCCEED

BY THE TIME we had been to half a dozen cities, we

had developed an informal checklist of the traits that distinguished a place where things seemed to work. These items are obviously different in nature, most of them are subjective, and some of them overlap. But if you tell us how a town measures up based on these standards, we can guess

a lot of other things about it. In our experiences, these things were true of the cities, large or small, that were working best:

1 *Divisive national politics seem a distant concern.* We first traveled during the run-up to the bitter

midterm elections of 2014, then while the Supreme Court was ruling on same-sex marriage and Obamacare, and then as

the 2016 presidential campaign was gathering steam. Given the places we were visiting, I imagine that many



you reach West River, with rough, dry badlands, some grazing cattle, and very few structures. Everyone who has looked at a map “knows” about the effect of topography and rainfall, but it means something different as it unfolds below you, like a real-world Google Earth.

You can also see the history of transportation in the way towns are settled. Even in South Dakota’s fertile East River, you can easily trace from low altitude what the railroads ushered in 150 years ago, and how their impact has ebbed. As we flew along one of the east-west lines that brought settlers into these territories and carried crops out to markets, we would see little settlements every few minutes. In the 1800s they were set up at roughly 10-mile intervals, an efficient distance when farmers were delivering their harvests by wagon. Now it seems that four out of five of those towns are withering, as farms are run with giant combines and crops are hauled by truck.

I would love for more people to know how this country looks from above. I would love for America’s sense of itself to include more of what we’ve seen on the ground.

DESPITE THE “BIG SORT,” TALENT DISPERSAL IS UNDER WAY

America is egalitarian, and snobbish. The city looks down on the countryside, the north on the south, the coastal meccas on the flyover interior—and of course each object of disdain looks back with its own reverse snobbery. A version of today’s hierarchical awareness is the concept of the “big sort.” This is the idea that if you have first-rate abilities and more than middling ambitions, you’ll need to end up in one of a handful of talent destinations. New York for finance; the San Francisco Bay Area or Seattle for tech; Washington, D.C., for politics and foreign policy. If you can make it there ...

This sorting is real. Through my working life, as a California patriot I have waited for the time when the news-media base would shift to the West Coast. I am waiting still. But nearly everywhere we went we were surprised by evidence of a different flow: of people with first-rate talents and ambitions who decided that someplace other than the biggest cities offered the best overall opportunities. We saw and documented examples in South Carolina, and South Dakota, and Vermont, and the central valley of California, and central Oregon. I’ll talk now about northern Minnesota and inland Southern California.

Duluth, Minnesota, has become one of the country’s aerospace centers largely because the two brothers who founded Cirrus Design, Alan and Dale Klapmeier, decided that they wanted to

spend their working lives amid the same Upper Midwest landscape and outdoors opportunities with which they had grown up. And now another generation of entrepreneurs is choosing Duluth. The Benson brothers, Dave and Greg, grew up in Minneapolis and went to college in the early 1990s at the University of Minnesota at Duluth. If you saw them in Southern California, you might think they were surfers—shaggy-haired, rangy, weathered. Their sports were instead the northern-plains variants: skiing, ice-skating, and skateboarding.

Soon after college, in 1997, they founded (with a friend, Tony Ciardelli) a company called TrueRide, which became a successful manufacturer of ramps, half-pipes, and other ingredients of outdoor skateboard parks. They started the company in Minneapolis but moved to Duluth because it was so much more affordable. They also liked Duluth’s livable scale, and what locals consider its year-round recreational opportunities. (Year-round if you enjoy the cold: When we visited the Bensons’ manufacturing plant, a week after Memorial Day in 2014, the last ice floe on Lake Superior had just melted. But, proving the locals’ loyalty, that same week residents were out-voting people from the likes of Asheville, North Carolina, and Provo, Utah, to win *Outside* magazine’s online poll to choose America’s “Best Town.”)

The skateboard parks that TrueRide sold were made of expensive plastic and composites. The Bensons didn’t like how much scrap was left over after they cut out the big sections for their skating ramps. They formed first a kitchenware company called Epicurean, then a furniture works called Loll, to make chairs, tables, cutting boards, and other products from the material they had been discarding.

On a wooded hillside outside Duluth, some of the company’s design and manufacturing offices are housed in a building that had once been a factory producing cement burial vaults and then was closed as a hazardous brownfield site. The city and state governments agreed to help clean up the site if the Bensons based their businesses there. As you approach from the back, you think, “This is what a Depression-era burial-vault factory would look like.” Once you step inside the door, you’re in an environment that the hippest firm in San Francisco or Brooklyn would envy: recycled timber, taken from the frigid depths of Lake Superior, for the walls, staircases, and beams; other structures made of the companies’ own sleek plastic; one whole wall of glass, looking out on the woods. From this building, Loll and Epicurean ship their products to customers in 61 countries. As Dave Benson showed us around, employees went off to

You can find hundreds of additional dispatches from the Fallows’ ongoing reporting trip, as well as videos, interactive maps, and more, at theatlantic.com/americanfutures.

of the people we interviewed were Donald Trump supporters.

But the presidential race just didn’t come up. Cable TV was often playing in the background, most frequently Fox News; if people had stopped to talk about what was on, they might have disagreed with one another and with us. But overwhelmingly

the focus in successful towns was not on national divisions but on practical problems that a community could address. The more often national politics came into local discussions, the worse shape the town was in.

2 You can pick out the local patriots. A standard

question we’d ask soon after arrival was “Who makes this town go?” The answers varied widely. Sometimes it was a mayor or a city-council member. Sometimes it was a local business titan or real-estate developer. Sometimes a university president or professor, a civic



activist, an artist, a saloon-keeper, a historian, or a radio personality. In one city in West Virginia, we asked a newspaper editor this question, and the answer turned out to be a folk musician who was also a civic organizer. What mattered was that the question *had* an answer. And the

jog on lunch breaks; in the winter they ski or skate. Racks just inside the front door hold their sporting equipment.

The Duluth area has new firms in aerospace, medical equipment, environmental tech, and other fields. “Ten years ago there weren’t many start-ups,” Dave Benson told us. “Now it’s buzzing.” If you saw this operation in San Francisco or Seattle, you would think: Of course! Where else could you combine the product-design talent that can appeal to a worldwide market, the emphasis on sustainability that has made the firm a leader in recycling techniques, and the production skills necessary to create a rapidly changing line of items? But you find it in Duluth—“because we just like the quality of life here,” Dave Benson said. And you find it in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Greenville, South Carolina; Burlington, Vermont; Louisville, Kentucky; Bend, Oregon; and Davis, California. And in larger but noncoastal cities like Pittsburgh and Columbus, Ohio.

And in Redlands, neighbor of now-notorious San Bernardino. When I was growing up there, in the Baby Boom era, its economy rested on the orange-growing business, the neighboring Norton Air Force Base, and a medical community serving the nearby desert area. Now the orange groves are nearly gone, the Air Force base is closed, and the desert communities have their own doctors—but the city has been transformed by the presence of a tech firm that by all rights should be in some bigger, fancier place. This company, Esri, is a world leader in geographic information systems, or GIS. These are essentially the industrial-strength counterparts to Google Earth, which governments and companies around the world use for everything from tracking pothole repairs to monitoring climate change.

Esri, which now has more than 10,000 employees worldwide and 2,500 in Redlands, “should have” been based somewhere near Harvard; that is where its founder, Jack Dangermond, did his original work in GIS in the late 1960s. But he and his wife, Laura, had grown up in Redlands (where I knew them), and preferred it. “We fundamentally felt more comfortable starting out, living, working, and operating our business in a place that was sort of off the grid, where we could actually get things done,” he wrote in an e-mail. Instead of going to where the tech talent pool already was, they chose where they wanted to be and recruited talent to join them there. Not every computer programmer wants to live in a less expensive, family-friendly city rather than in the Bay Area, but enough do to make the company a success. The Dangermonds still own the company, which is valued in the billions, and have taken on a role as smaller-town counterparts to Warren Buffett: personally unflashy, doing internationally successful work from an out-of-the-way location, and behind the scenes supporting the town’s philanthropies, especially conservation efforts.



REDLANDS RENEWAL

Above: Robb Pearson, the general manager of Augie's Coffee Roasters, part of a downtown revival. **Right:** An orange grove at the University of Redlands, a legacy of the city's original industry. **Left:** The headquarters of the mapping company Esri, whose owners wanted to live and work in the city where they grew up.

(Jack Dangermond's parents, Dutch immigrants, ran a nursery in town, and his original training was in landscape architecture.) The Esri campus in Redlands, like Loll and Epicurean's in Duluth, is just what you'd expect to find in a famous tech center, exactly where you wouldn't expect to find it.

Where you wouldn't expect, that is, except we have seen *so much* of this nearly every place we've gone. America thinks of itself as having a few distinct islands of tech creativity; I now see it as an archipelago of start-ups and reinventions.

John Dearie, a co-author (with Courtney Geduldig) of *Where the Jobs Are*, argues that new-business formation is the single most important guide to future employment trends. This is because of the unlikely-sounding but true economic observation that, over the decades, all the net new job growth within the U.S. economy has come from firms in their first five years of existence (and mainly from fast-growing ones in their very first year). Big, established firms—Walmart, McDonald's—employ a lot of people. But the increase in jobs, overall, statistically comes from new firms, as they go from no employees to the first dozens or hundreds. The Kauffman Foundation annually

more quickly it was provided, the better shape the town was in.

3 “**Public-private partnerships**” are real. Through the years I had assumed this term was just another slogan, or a euphemism for sweetheart deals between Big Government and Big Business.

But in successful towns, people can point to something specific and say, *This* is what a partnership means. In Greenville, South Carolina, the public-school system includes an elementary school for engineering in a poor neighborhood. The city runs the school; local companies like GE send in

engineers to teach and supervise science fairs, at their own expense. In Holland, Michigan, the family-owned Padnos scrap-recycling company works with a local ministry called 70x7 Life Recovery to hire ex-prisoners who would otherwise have trouble reentering the workforce. In Fresno, California,

a collaboration among the city, county, and state governments; local universities; and several tech start-ups trains high-school dropouts and other unemployed people in computer skills. The more specifically a community can explain what their public-private partnerships mean, the better off the city is.



ranks the “start-up density” of metro areas: the number of new firms divided by population size. It covers larger metro areas than most we visited, but San Francisco is not even in the top 10 of the 2015 ranking (it’s No. 12). Miami, New York City, and Orlando are the top three, followed by Austin, Denver, and Tampa. Columbus, Ohio, showed the greatest increase in start-ups from the preceding year. In 2015 both New York State and Florida made the list of top 10 states in start-up density, at Nos. 4 and 5, respectively. The rest were flyover states—North Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Utah, South Dakota, Colorado, Vermont, and Nevada. North Dakota and Wyoming might be downplayed as energy-boom outliers, but the rest reflected “normal” business growth.

A great, underappreciated advantage of “everywhere else” in America: *The real estate is cheap*. In New York, in San Francisco, in half a dozen other cities, everything about life is slave to hyper-expensive real estate. In Sioux Falls, South Dakota; in Allentown, Pennsylvania; in inland California; across the south, costs are comparatively low. This



has an effect—on how much you have to work, on what you think you need, on the risks you can take. Every calculation—the cash flow you must maintain, the life balance you can work toward—is different when a very nice family house costs a few hundred thousand dollars rather than a few million.

“HOPELESS” PLACES ARE BUSILY REINVENTING THEMSELVES

Apart from San Bernardino, the hardest-pressed place we visited was the area of northeastern Mississippi, close to the Alabama border, that has rebranded itself as the “Golden Triangle.” This is rolling, wooded country rather than the bottomland of the delta, but it is nearly as poor. The cities that make up the triangle are Columbus, Starkville, and West Point. During the slaveholding era and afterward this was a cotton center; Columbus still has a rich endowment of antebellum homes. In modern times the region has had an economic base consisting of the campus of Mississippi State University, in Starkville; an Air Force pilot-training base outside Columbus; some catfish farms; and low-wage, low-tech factories. Nonetheless, the long-term trend was downward. A quarry and workshop in Columbus that supplied marble headstones for the military and that thrived during the Vietnam War closed. The low-wage, low-tech factories that had come to the area after World War II—a toilet-seat plant, cut-and-sew garment workshops, a meatpacking plant owned by Sara Lee that once employed 1,000 people—closed one by one. A little more than half of the 120,000 or so residents of the Golden Triangle are white; most of the rest are black. The median household income last year was about \$35,000, versus about \$54,000 for the country as a whole.

If you wanted a vista of American hopelessness, you might think to start in Mississippi. But here again we heard that though the country as a whole was in trouble, things at home were moving in the right direction.

The main economic turnaround of the region is generally traced to an organization called Golden Triangle Development Link and its leaders, a white man from Arkansas named Joe Max Higgins and a black woman from Mississippi named Brenda Lathan. Over the past decade they have negotiated, cajoled, and otherwise persuaded a series of international manufacturing firms to build new factories in an industrial zone surrounding the new Golden Triangle airport, equidistant from the three cities. What is remarkable is less the details of the negotiations than the sense and pace of progress, in yet another corner of America where you’d hardly expect it.

When we first visited early last year, Joe Max Higgins took us to the most modern “mini-mill”

4 **People know the civic story.** America has a “story,” which everyone understands even if only to say it’s a myth or a lie. A few states have their guiding stories—California as either the ever-promising or the sadly spoiled frontier, Vermont as its own separate Eden. Successful cities have their

stories too. For Sioux Falls, South Dakota, that it’s just the right size: big enough so that people who have come from the smaller-town prairie can find challenge, stimulation, opportunity; small enough to be livable and comfortable. For Columbus, Ohio, which is several times larger than Sioux Falls, that it’s

big enough to make anything possible; small enough to actually get things done. For Bend, Oregon; or Duluth, Minnesota; or Winters, California, that they are in uniquely attractive locations. For Pittsburgh, that it has set an example of successful turnaround. For Eastport, Maine, or Allentown or Fresno or Detroit,

that they are in the process of turning around. As with guiding national myths, the question is not whether these assessments seem precisely accurate to outsiders. Their value is in giving citizens a sense of how today’s efforts are connected to what happened yesterday and what they hope for tomorrow.



for producing steel in North America, in the Golden Triangle industrial zone. This “mini” structure is what most lay observers would consider to be unimaginably vast. Ladles that appeared to be the size of 747s transported burbling loads of molten metal. The cooling line for the endless stream of new sheet metal stretched thousands of feet, under one roof. Mountains of scrap metal, from recycling shops and auto junkyards, sat outside the mill, raw material for the new steel to be made inside. This was the closest I have come in the United States to the experience of major factory life in China—and it was in rural Mississippi, where a racially mixed workforce of almost 700 earned a median wage of more than \$80,000. A Russian-owned company invested more than \$1.5 billion to build this plant starting in 2005. Steel Dynamics, based in Indiana, bought it two years ago and is expanding production. Now it is only one of several major high-wage manufacturers in the area.

Several times over the past three years, Deb and I have flown, low, over the factories of the Golden Triangle. They look as if they were laid out in an instructive diorama. Near

the older, smaller Lowndes County airport in Columbus are the all-but-abandoned toilet-seat works, the shut-down garment factories, the headstone works, and other sad-looking remnants of an old economy. Ten miles west, a few minutes’ flight, is the large, modern runway of the Golden Triangle commercial airport, with the sprawling steelworks on one side, and helicopter and truck-engine plants nearby. A few minutes to the north, just past some catfish farms and cattle-grazing land, is a scene of industrial ruin: the derelict Sara Lee meatpacking plant in West Point, which was being picked apart by wreckers on our first visit early last year. When we flew over the same area again three months ago, a \$300 million Yokohama Tires factory had just opened, with the company’s most modern production facilities in the world.

THE ASSIMILATION ENGINE MOVES EVER FORWARD

Almost every place we went, the changes in America’s ethnic makeup were obvious. Almost no place did this come up as

5 *They have a downtown.*

This seems obvious, but it is probably the quickest single marker of the condition of a town. For a “young” country like the United States, surprisingly many cities still have “good bones,” the classic Main Street–style structures built from the late 1800s through World

War II. In the mall-and-freeway decades after the war, some of these buildings were razed and many more were abandoned or disfigured with cheap aluminum fronts.

Most of the cities we

visited were pouring attention, resources, and creativity into their downtown. The Main Street America project, from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has coordinated downtown-revival projects in some



2,000 communities. Of the downtowns we saw, Greenville’s and Burlington’s were the most advanced, studied by planners around the world. But downtown ambitions of any sort are a positive sign, and second- and third-floor apartments and condos over restaurants and stores with lights on at night



GEORGIA EDUCATION INNOVATION

At Camden County High School, in Kingsland, Georgia, students in one of five “career academies” can take classes in electrical work, pottery, carpentry, culinary arts, and law enforcement. Rich Gamble (below), a former naval criminal investigator, stages mock crimes as part of the school’s law-enforcement program.



an economic, cultural, or political emergency, or even as the most pressing local issue. Based on everything we could see, the problems of immigration that presidential candidates have seized on for political advantage were largely another “rest of America” problem. That is, people generally saw things as manageable or improving locally, but believed they were falling apart everywhere else.

In 2014, a nationwide Gallup poll found that immigration had “modestly below-average importance to registered voters”; on a list of 15 challenges facing the nation, it came in at No. 9. In 2015, Gallup found that 65 percent of Americans thought levels of immigration should stay the same—or go up. In California, the state most dramatically affected by immigration, a 2015 poll reported that 59 percent of voters viewed immigration as a “positive force.” If you hadn’t heard the speeches and read the stories about an immigration-driven crisis in America, you might conclude city by city that the American assimilation machine was still functioning.

We saw this shift all around the country: older people

whiter, younger people darker. One version of what happens next is familiar to anyone who’s ever read a newspaper. Richer, whiter people think that public schools, public places, center cities are no longer for “people like us” and withdraw themselves, their children, and their tax support to the suburbs or private schools. We did see cases of that. But we also saw the opposite.

One example: The little town of Holland, Michigan, got its name because so many Dutch people congregated there. A generation ago, its population was overwhelmingly white, mainly Dutch, and generally affiliated with sects of the conservative Dutch Reformed Church. In high-school graduation photos from the 1970s, nearly all the faces are of blue-eyed blondes.

Since then, Michigan’s surprisingly important agricultural industry, including a large Heinz pickle factory right in downtown Holland, has drawn a substantial Latin American population, and strong Holland-area manufacturing and design companies have drawn immigrants from around the world. By 2005 the public-school population in this famously white town was mainly nonwhite.

In 2010 the superintendent of Holland’s public schools, Brian Davis, who grew up in a white farming family in Michigan, began a campaign to get major new bond funding for the schools. This was in the depth of the financial collapse, in a hard-hit state, in the same election cycle in which the Tea Party made its debut—and Davis was asking a mainly white electorate, most of whom did not have children in the public schools, to refinance the schools. And they did. The new programs and facilities paid for by the bond, according to Davis, helped reverse a decline in public confidence in the schools. “We have children who come from homes with \$1 million-plus annual income, and ones who come from homes with incomes under \$20,000,” Davis told me in 2013. “Just under 10 percent of them are considered homeless.” He reeled off some of the 20 native languages of his students. “Of course Spanish, but then Japanese, Russian, Tagalog, Korean. We’ve got more Garcias than Vans”—*Van* being the shorthand for standard Dutch names. “We’re what the future of public education looks like.” This is the reality as we heard it in many other cities.

Another example: Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It would be easy to take this city as an example of the ways in which American ethnicity is not changing. Sioux Falls is nearly 90 percent white.

But a very noticeable part of the Sioux Falls street scene are people who obviously did not come from Spearfish, or Bismarck, or the other farming towns of the Great Plains. Some are American Indians from Pine Ridge or other reservations;

suggest that the downtown has crossed a decisive threshold and will survive.

6 *They are near a research university.* Research universities have become the modern counterparts to a natural harbor or a river confluence. In the short term, they lift the

economy by bringing in a student population. Over the longer term, they transform a town through the researchers and professors they attract: When you find a Chinese or German physicist in the Dakotas, or a Yale literature Ph.D. in California’s



Central Valley, that person probably works for a university.

Research universities have become powerful start-up incubators. For instance: Clemson and the array of automotive-tech firms that have grown up around it in South Carolina,

or UC Davis and associated agro-tech ventures. Riverside and San Bernardino were similar-size cities with similar economic prospects at the end of World War II. Their paths have diverged, in part because in the 1950s Riverside was chosen as the site of a new University of California campus.

some are Latino or Asian migrants as in any other city; but a substantial number are Somalis, Sudanese, or people from Nepal or Burma or other sites of recent turmoil. The U.S. State Department manages the resettlement of refugees across the country, working mainly with religious groups. Sioux Falls, despite being relatively “nondiverse” and remote, is a city with one of the best records of absorbing refugees (Burlington, Vermont, is another).

The civic and business leaders of Sioux Falls we spoke with, most of them white, seemed proud rather than beleaguered about their city’s new role as a melting pot. As always, there were problems and challenges. Refugees from Sudan and Somalia had to be instructed not to offer bribes if stopped by the police—and the police had to be told not to throw the book at the refugees. A boy from Africa had never used an indoor toilet and had to be shown how. Sioux Falls is reviving its downtown district, but most of the area is laid out in typical freeway-era American sprawl. Many refugees don’t have cars (or can’t drive), and they can’t rely on the shaky public-bus system. So on hot days in the summer and very cold winter nights, you can see groups of Somalis or Sudanese trudging along the roadways to and from their jobs at factories or shopping malls.

The most dramatic display of this era’s assimilation process is at a huge pig slaughterhouse, one of the dominant features of downtown Sioux Falls’ cityscape. The plant was set up in the early 1900s by the John Morrell company; for many years it was the city’s largest employer, and it still employs more than 3,000 people; eventually it was sold to Smithfield and in 2013 to the Chinese firm Shuanghui (which hoped that American-raised and -processed meat would be popular among Chinese customers wary of tainted-food scandals). Through the 20th century, the Morrell plant was a site of representative struggles in American society: the violent efforts to unionize the workforce in the 1930s and the corporate efforts to de-unionize it in the 1980s, as wave after wave of newcomers arrived from overseas or farm towns to work “at Morrell’s” as their entrée to urban life. University professors, bankers, newspaper reporters, and tech workers in Sioux Falls told me that their families had first moved to the city to work at the plant.

The workers at the slaughterhouse are now largely immigrants and refugees. The safety and work-rules instructions are posted in 30 languages. The workers on the line, cutting up pig carcasses, include Muslim women from Sudan or Somalia,

saving money to send their children to college. Deb met two young sisters from Darfur, one of whom was in high school and had joined ROTC there. Her main regret was that she was not allowed to wear her ROTC uniform to school on dress days, because ROTC rules forbade wearing the uniform with a head scarf. (Yarmulkes were acceptable, since they fit under the uniform cap.)

We heard a few months later that the rule had been waived. The young woman wore her ROTC uniform, with her head scarf, to school.

AN ARTS REVOLUTION IS TRANSFORMING SMALL CITIES

I am a philistine, who has not really cared about the state of the arts. Give me research centers and “makerspaces” with 3-D printers, plus a factory or two, and I’ll tell you how I feel about a town. Perhaps the topic on which I’ve most changed my mind through our travels concerns the civic importance of local arts, and the energy being devoted to them across the country.

Almost every place we visited offers an example: Bend, Oregon, whose Art in Public Places project has installed large sculptures at 20 traffic roundabouts; Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which has converted the ruins of a Bethlehem Steel plant into a concert center and arts space; Riverside, California, with life-size sculptures of prominent leaders of all ethnicities throughout its new downtown mall;

Rapid City, South Dakota (the closest city to Mount Rushmore), with its life-size sculptures of all the American presidents spaced throughout its downtown; Winters, California, with its springtime Plein Air Festival, for which it invites artists to visit and portray the area in paintings, sculpture, or photographs. Three examples of what is happening elsewhere are in the largish city of Pittsburgh; the smallish city of Fresno, California; and the tiny town of Ajo, Arizona.

Pittsburgh’s late-20th-century transformation from dirty, dying steel center to chic tech hub is probably the best-known American turnaround story. Parts of it are instructive for cities elsewhere, notably the emphasis on universities as centers of new-tech growth. Parts are unique. “Pittsburgh feels as vibrant as it does—museums, opera, restaurants, but not much traffic—because we’re living in an infrastructure built for twice as many people as live here now,” Dutch MacDonald, the CEO of the design firm Maya, told me.

AMERICA THINKS OF ITSELF AS HAVING A FEW ISLANDS OF TECH CREATIVITY; I NOW SEE IT AS AN ARCHIPELAGO OF START-UPS.

7 They have, and care about, a community college. Not every city can have a research university. Any ambitious one can have a community college.

Just about every world-historical trend is pushing the United States (and other countries) toward a less equal,

more polarized existence: labor-replacing technology, globalized trade, self-segregated residential-housing patterns, the American practice of unequal district-based funding for public schools. Community colleges are the main exception, potentially offering a connection to high-wage technical jobs for

people who might otherwise be left with no job or one at minimum wage. East Mississippi Community College has taken people who were jobless or on welfare and prepared them for work in nearby factories that pay much more than the local median household income (for instance, some \$80,000 in the

steel factory, versus a local median income of about \$35,000). Fresno City College works with local tech firms and the city’s Cal State campus to train the children of farm workers (among others) for high-tech agribusiness jobs.

Obviously, this does not end inequality, and badly run

That is exactly the formula that led to devastation in Detroit: lots of space and buildings, not enough people. In Pittsburgh, by all accounts, the difference is the extraordinary density of rich, locally rooted philanthropies set up by the titans of the robber-baron era and still committed to the city's development. The Mellon, Heinz, Carnegie, Frick, and other charities support Pittsburgh institutions in a way any city would envy but few can imitate.

The arts initiative that struck us in Pittsburgh was bottom-up and frugally operated, rather than a big foundation project. It is known as the City of Asylum project, and its goal is to revive a run-down area of Pittsburgh and make it a haven for persecuted writers from the rest of the world. In the 1990s Henry Reese, the founder of local tele-marketing and coupon-book firms, and his wife, an artist named Diane Samuels, became interested in the cause of oppressed novelists, poets, and journalists. By 2004, they had organized and opened the only independently funded U.S. branch of the City of Asylum movement, which was already strong in Europe. (There are two other such cities in the United States, but they are run by universities; Pittsburgh's is on its own.) They put up some of their own money, and ran fund-raisers and recruited donors for more, so they could buy a series of rowhouses in the once-seedy Mexican War Streets district of Pittsburgh (the streets are named for battles and generals from that war) for their writers and artists to stay for periods of months or years.

One of the first was a long-imprisoned dissident poet from China. He decided to turn his house into public art, covering it with poems in large Chinese characters. A Burmese writer and her family came, and painted the exterior of their house with landscapes and "dreamscapes." Strolling down the streets is like being in a graffiti-covered part of town, but one where the style, palette, and theme vary building by building, and the decorations have been done carefully and proudly rather than on the fly. The program has steadily expanded, still locally funded; in the past decade more than 250 poets, writers, musicians, and artists from around the world have put on public performances in Pittsburgh. They have, through the arts,



Doug Wagner, an architectural designer, at his studio in Bend, Oregon, one of many cities with an ambitious public-arts program

enhanced the city's international reputation and, more important, given it an expanded conception of itself. Plus, the Mexican War Streets district has become a tourist draw.

In Fresno, Heather Parish, the publicity director of a successful arts festival called the Rogue, said that cheap real estate would be the basis for the city's artistic future. "Fresno is the bohemia of California," she told us when we visited. "That's because you can *afford to live here!* And the pace of life is such that you can have a full-time job if you need to, but not be so stressed out or have the 90-minute commutes of L.A. You can afford the garage as your studio, if you need it, which you can't do in San Jose anymore." Of all the cities we visited, my mind changed most about Fresno—in part because I'd heard about it all my life as one of California's least hip cities, and in

part because of the spark that the Rogue festival brought to the businesses in the artsy Tower District. Last February, on the opening evening of the 2015 Rogue, the capacity crowd filing into the restored Tower Theater passed belly dancers, men on stilts, fire-breathers, mimes, and acrobats; inside they saw strictly timed two-minute performances by more than two dozen dramatic, musical, and stand-up-comedy artists who would be part of the festival. Nothing about it said small-town talent show. Instead it said, "There is more going on, in more places, than you imagined."

The tiny-town example is Ajo, far south of Phoenix. Ajo's economic existence, like the Carnegie-era version of Pittsburgh's, once depended on heavy industry. In the early 1900s, a mining company decided to exploit a major high-grade copper deposit in Ajo, where Spaniards, Mexicans, and American Indians had dug small mines for many years. From the opening of the company's mine and an adjoining rail line just before World War I until a bitter labor dispute in 1985 that led to the mine's closure, everything about the town depended on the copper business.

The ugly remnants of those days are a vast crater, more than 1,000 feet deep and a mile across, and a mountain of mine tailings visible from 25 miles away. But the people running the mine had cultural and artistic ambitions, and they left a beautiful

community colleges can make things worse by loading students with debt without improving their circumstances. Nationwide, only about 40 percent of those who start at a public community college finish within six years. But we saw a number of schools that were clearly forces in the right direction. The more

often and more specifically we heard people talk about their community college, the better we ended up feeling about the direction of that town.

8 They have unusual schools. Early in our stay, we would ask what was the most distinctive school to visit

at the K–12 level. If four or five answers came quickly to mind, that was a good sign.

The examples people suggested ranged widely. Some were "normal" public schools. Some were charters. Some emphasized career and

technical training, like Camden County High School, in Georgia. Some were statewide public boarding schools, like the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities, and the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Sciences. Some were



legacy as well. The manager, John Greenway, was a Yale graduate and a Rough Rider at San Juan Hill with Teddy Roosevelt. His wife, Isabella, was a lifelong friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. A century ago the Greenways laid out an elegant, expansive plaza that would be admired in any Spanish town, and a comparably stately school. They lived in a white-stucco-walled, red-tile-roofed house on the highest point in the town. From there you can look, and I did, down on the lovely formal architecture of the town center, with the white-stucco arcades, under red-tile roofs, of the plaza that the Greenways built. When I first saw the plaza last year and imagined the remoteness of Ajo when it was built, I thought of the grand opera house that rubber tycoons had built in the Brazilian jungle, in Manaus.

For years Ajo eked out an existence from what Gabrielle David, the editor of *Ajo Copper News*, called “blue-collar retirees,” who came in RVs or with tents to stretch pensions as far as they could go. Ajo is the closest town to the spectacular Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, which we decided was given that name only because another reserve was already called Saguaro National Park. The dominant plant in Organ Pipe is the towering, stately saguaro, with shorter, multibranch clumps of (aptly named) organ-pipe cacti in between. But most of the park was closed after drug gangs murdered a park ranger in 2002; it reopened, drawing visitors, only recently.

In 1992 a woman named Tracy Taft, who had once taught philosophy at Bryn Mawr College and had then been a community organizer in the Northeast, visited Ajo and was so struck by the austere beauty of the Sonoran desert that she bought a house that same day. She moved there to live in 2000, and in a collaborative process that resembles what we have seen elsewhere, she has raised money, enlisted allies, become part of nationwide city-improvement networks, and used her city’s potential as an arts center as the basis for its economic revitalization.

Taft is now the executive director of the International Sonoran Desert Alliance. It has collected government and foundation grants and investments to turn the “good bones” of Ajo’s architecture into an arts community and destination resort. First it renovated the stately Curley School, converting it into affordable-rent apartments for painters, sculptors, photographers, and others. Then the alliance remodeled the downtown plaza, which is a mixture of still-shuttered storefronts and occupied restaurants, shops, and public offices. Last year it opened the Sonoran Desert Conference Center in former schoolrooms redone in a hip style. This is designed to attract conference traffic and host “tri-national” events involving the United States, Mexico, and the nearby native Tohono O’odham Nation. “We



THE ARTS REVOLUTION Above: Pittsburgh’s City of Asylum project, which aims to transform a run-down area into a haven for persecuted writers from around the world. Right: Nighttime in downtown Ajo, Arizona, a mining town reborn as an artists’ community.

saw artists revitalizing urban inner cities and wondered if we could make it happen intentionally in a small town,” Taft told us. The city’s vitality now comes from determined use of the arts.

THE END OF THE SECOND GILDED AGE?

Everywhere we went, Deb and I saw the imprint of the great national efforts of the past. An astonishing amount of the public architecture of 21st-century America was laid down in a few Depression-era years in the 1930s, by the millions of people employed by the Works Progress Administration. The small airports we landed at were the result of mid-century defense-and-transportation building projects, as were the interstates we flew above. The grid-pattern fields of the farmland Midwest had been laid out by the rules of settlement from the earliest days of the republic. The practices that made them the most productive farmland in the world were crucially spurred by land-grant universities and agricultural-research schools. The wildlands and ecosystems that have escaped development did so because of their protection as national parks or monuments.

To seize the opportunities, and cope with the failures, of this moment in American history, national efforts of the kind that more recently underlay the creation of the Internet, the GPS network, and DNA decoding might again be best. But for now, even if most parts of the complex American “system” work better than their counterparts in the rest of the world, our national politics works worse. Thus the United States has a harder time taking the steps that would make adjusting to this era less painful and more productive. As the technological and economic

religious or private schools. The common theme was intensity of experimentation.

9 They make themselves open. The anti-immigrant passion that has inflamed this election cycle was not something people expressed in most of the cities we visited. On the

contrary. Politicians, educators, businesspeople, students, and retirees frequently stressed the ways their communities were trying to attract and include new people. Cities as different as Sioux Falls, Burlington, and Fresno have gone to extraordinary lengths to assimilate refugees from recent wars.

The mayor of Greenville, South Carolina, asked us to listen for how many different languages we heard spoken on the street by business visitors.

Every small town in America has thought about how to offset the natural brain drain that has historically sent its brightest young people elsewhere. The

same emphasis on inclusion that makes a town attractive to talented outsiders increases its draw to its own natives.

10 They have big plans. If I see a national politician with a blueprint for how things will be better 20 years from now, I think: “Good luck!” In fact,



imperatives pushing toward a “gig economy” erode the protections of the corporate-employment model—more side income via Uber and Etsy, fewer guaranteed pensions or health benefits—national policy could respond, as it did more than a century ago when the industrial age eroded the protections of the family-farming era. Then, the response took the form of safety legislation, child-labor laws, union rights, and the minimum wage. Now it could take the form of extensions of health-care coverage and other safeguards harder to obtain without career-long jobs. Technology-friendly economists like Laura Tyson, of UC Berkeley, and Lenny Mendonca, of McKinsey, have laid out just such programs. As automation and world trade eliminate, or immiserate, some of today’s jobs, schools can help prepare students for other kinds—as happened a century ago with the creation of high schools and then again after World War II with the GI Bill.

But that won’t happen soon. Whichever party wins the presidency, the other will hold enough of the Congress to make comprehensive measures of any sort very hard to push through. That is why local resilience and adaptability of the kind we have witnessed deserve nationwide attention.

It’s now commonplace to observe that the United States is living through a Second Gilded Age. The distortions of that first age—the extremes of wealth and welfare, the sudden dislocations due to technology and trade and ethnic change, the

dismay about corrupt and plutocratic politics, the shunting of populist concerns toward racist outbursts—all have their clear counterparts now. Sadly, history is not so mechanistic that we can say: Things turned out all right the last time around, so let’s wait for the reforms to happen again.

But when we think about the shift from the original Gilded Age, in the late 19th century, to what came after, three elements can show us what to anticipate and what to seize on right now.

The first, unpredictable element is the national shock that galvanizes effort. For me the central document in American political psychology is William James’s 1910 essay “The Moral Equivalent of War.” America is capable of almost anything when threatened militarily, James argued; think what it could do if it could muster the same determination without the threat. The sin of commission for the United States after its greatest recent shock, the 9/11 attacks, was the invasion of Iraq, with the consequences it will entail through the decades. The sin of omission may have been worse, to miss the opportunity for real national improvement. Consider how Dwight Eisenhower used the then-terrifying “Sputnik shock” of the late 1950s: mainly as a spur to technological and educational investment.

The second element is one that Paul Starr, of Princeton University, stresses in a 2015 *American Prospect* essay called “How Gilded Ages End.” Democracy, he argues, finally depends on and is defined by the ability of political power to control strictly economic forces. Otherwise you’re talking about a nationwide corporation, not a country.

American history of the era that began with J. P. Morgan and ran through the New Deal was about political power reasserting its preeminence. “Behind the myriad of specific reforms” that constituted the early-20th-century Progressive movement, Starr writes, “was a common recognition—a collective revulsion against the privileges of great wealth allied with great power.” He argues that the country is due for such an adjustment again. Through the past generation-plus, this struggle has been cast as a Republican-

versus-Democratic issue. From Nixon onward, the modern GOP has channeled resentment about intellectual and cultural elites, and racial minorities, into support for the business elite. Thus white voters in West Virginia or Kansas support tax policies that disproportionately benefit financiers in New York and San Francisco. Despite their obvious differences, the discontents propelling Donald Trump’s campaign and that of Bernie Sanders could signal a change.

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI, IS A CITY WITH ONE OF THE BEST RECORDS OF ABSORBING REFUGEES.

few national politicians even pretend to offer a long-term vision anymore. When a mayor or city-council member shows me a map of how new downtown residences will look when completed, or where the new greenway will go, I think: “I’d like to come



back.” Cities still make plans, because they can do things.

II They have craft breweries. One final marker, perhaps the most reliable: A city on the way back will have one or more craft breweries, and probably some small distilleries too. Until 2012, that

would have been an unfair test for Mississippi, which effectively outlawed craft beers by setting maximum alcohol levels at 5 percent. Now that law has changed, and Mississippi has 10 craft breweries. Once-restrictive Utah

has even more. A town that has craft breweries also has a certain kind of entrepreneur, and a critical mass of mainly young (except for me) customers. You may think I’m joking, but just try to find an exception.

— James Fallows





THE LIBRARY CARD

By DEBORAH FALLOWS

AS WE TRAVELED around the U.S. reporting on the revival of towns and cities, we always made the local library an early stop. We'd hit the newspaper offices, the chamber of commerce, city hall, and Main Street for an introduction to the economics, politics, and stresses of a town. The visit to the public library revealed its heart and soul.

The traditional impression of libraries as places for quiet reading, research, and borrowing books—and of librarians as schoolmarmish *shush-ers*—is outdated, as they have metamorphosed into bustling civic centers. For instance, Deschutes Public Library in Bend, Oregon, now cooperates with dozens of organizations, from AARP (which helps people with their taxes) to Goodwill (which teaches résumé writing). A social worker trains staff to guide conversations about one of the most frequent questions people trustingly bring into the library: Can you help me figure out how to

meet my housing costs?

There are three areas where libraries function as vibrant centers of America's towns: technology, education, and community.

TECHNOLOGY

Many people rely on libraries for their computer and Internet use. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center report, more than a quarter of Americans who had visited a public library in the past year had used a computer, the Internet, or a WiFi connection there, with the usage numbers higher among minorities and low-income groups.

More ambitiously, libraries have also begun offering “makerspaces”—shared workspaces that provide technological tools and are designed to facilitate collaborative work. I recently toured the makerspace at Washington, D.C.'s flagship Martin Luther King Jr. library. An eclectic group of hobbyists, entrepreneurs, and a mom with her homeschooled preteens were learning about tools like 3-D printers, laser cutters, and wire benders. Ben Franklin, who conducted some of his experiments with electricity in the public spaces of the Library Company of Philadelphia, would surely appreciate today's public-library makerspaces.

Miguel Figueroa, who directs the Center for the

Future of Libraries at the American Library Association, says makerspaces are part of libraries' expanded mission to be places where people can not only consume knowledge, but create new knowledge.

EDUCATION

In my conversations with librarians around the country, the most urgent topic was the education of America's youngest children. Patrick Losinski, the CEO of the Columbus, Ohio, metropolitan library system, told me that when a 5-year-old walks into kindergarten, takes a book, and holds it upside down, “you know there is no reading readiness there.” I heard of many projects like Books for Babies, which is run by Friends of the Library in tiny Winters, California: Volunteers scour birth announcements and go stroller-spotting, offering each new baby a box with a T-shirt, a cap, two books, and an application to join the library.

In Charleston, West Virginia, despite recent funding losses that severely cut library staff, librarians still provide materials to teachers all across the 900-square-mile county. In Columbus, Mississippi, the library gives high-school students access to Civil War-era archives—slave sale records, court cases, and secrets of the community—making real the

racial history of their state. In Redlands, California, the program attracting the most volunteers is one-on-one literacy tutorials for adults. And many adults use public libraries as their access point to postsecondary online courses.

COMMUNITY

The library in West Hartford, Connecticut, offers conversational-English classes for immigrants. The library in Seattle provides citizenship classes. The library in Duluth, Minnesota, has a seed-lending program for local gardeners. The library in Washington, D.C., offers tango dancing on Saturday afternoons. In libraries, I have practiced yoga and tai chi, sipped lattes in coffee shops, and watched Millennials with laptops arrange their virtual start-up offices at long reading-room tables. Libraries serve as anchors in times of distress: The library in Ferguson, Missouri, kept its doors open even when schools were closed, and libraries in New Jersey became places of refuge after Hurricane Sandy.

If these seem like deviations from libraries' historical role as lenders of books, consider that, around the start of the 20th century, the earliest Carnegie libraries included bowling alleys, music halls, billiard tables, swimming pools, and gymnasiums.

And the third element that marked the end of the first Gilded Age was fertile experimentation with new approaches and possibilities. Louis Brandeis's famous claim that the American states, rather than the central government, were the real “laboratories of democracy” came in a Supreme Court ruling in 1932. For several decades before that, states and cities across the country had experimented with new school systems, new tax and spending schemes, new ways of providing public services, new public-health programs, new regulatory approaches, all toward the goal of responding to the crises of that age. “In Cleveland, Toledo, across the Midwest and plains states, you saw these dedicated reformers,” Michael Kazin of Georgetown University, a historian of the Progressive era and a biographer of William Jennings Bryan, told me. “Some were Socialists, some Democrats, some Republicans—they were all trying something new.” One of Bryan's goals, Kazin said, was to let the politically disparate

but actively experimental reformers in one state know about parallel efforts elsewhere.

When the national mood after the first Gilded Age favored reform, possibilities that had been tested, refined, and made to work in various “laboratories of democracy” were at hand. After our current Gilded Age, the national mood will change again. When it does, a new set of ideas and plans will be at hand. We've seen them being tested in places we never would have suspected, by people who would never join forces in the national capital. But their projects, the progress they have made, and their goals are more congruent than even they would ever imagine. Until the country's mood does change, the people who have been reweaving the national fabric will be more effective if they realize how many other people are working toward the same end. **A**

James Fallows is an Atlantic national correspondent.



TACKLING THE YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT CRISIS

BY FREEMAN HRABOWSKI AND JAMIE DIMON

As President of one of America's leading educational institutions and CEO of one of the world's largest financial firms, we see the world through two very different lenses.

But there is one challenge that we both see clearly: too many young people are not on a path to meaningful employment that will enable them to join the middle class.

This challenge is exacerbated by the growing economic crisis of high inner-city unemployment, low high-school graduation rates and high college drop-out rates.

The result is truly a national tragedy: over five million young people, including one in five African-Americans and Latinos, are neither working nor in school.

To tackle youth unemployment and support the needs of today's economy, students should be informed and educated about all their options, including college and career pathways that don't include pursuing a four-year degree immediately. Students connected to high-quality education and training programs have a chance to find a way out of poverty and a real chance at economic opportunity.

Educators need to better align what they teach with the skills employers desperately need. Likewise, business leaders need to support the education system as it strives to teach critical thinking and other workforce skills.

To address the youth unemployment crisis, we are committed to increasing the number of young people who get on a pathway to economic success by being college and career-ready.

First, we want to transform how states and cities design and develop career-focused education programs. JPMorgan Chase and its partners are launching a multi-million dollar competition for states to expand access to career-pathway programs that can lead to high-skill and high-wage jobs.

Second, we need to make greater investments in career-focused education programs that are aligned with the needs of emerging industries. Programs focused on jobs like robotics, medical science and coding – the skills that employers desperately need.

Now is the time for greater private and public focus on equipping young people at all income levels with the skills and experiences to be career-ready. Without this, economic opportunity and a shot at the middle class will continue to be out of reach for generations to come.

Freeman Hrabowski is the President of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Jamie Dimon is the Chairman and CEO of JPMorgan Chase & Co.

To learn more about New Skills for Youth please visit: jpmorganchase.com

NEW SKILLS FOR YOUTH
JPMORGAN CHASE & CO.

What happened when 11 audacious exiles armed themselves for a violent night in the Gambia

“LET’S GO TAKE BACK OUR COUNTRY”

By
**STUART A.
REID**

Illustrations by
**MATTHEW
WOODSON**







THE DARK HOURS of the morning on December 30, 2014, eight men gathered in a graveyard a mile down the road from the official residence of Yahya Jammeh, the president of the Gambia. The State House overlooks the Atlantic Ocean from the capital city of Banjul, on an island at the mouth of the Gambia River. It was built in the 1820s and served as the governor's mansion through the end of British colonialism, in 1965. Trees and high walls separate the house from the road, obscuring any light inside.

The men were dressed in boots and dark pants, and as two of them stood guard, the rest donned Kevlar helmets and leather gloves, strapped on body armor and CamelBaks, and loaded their guns. Their plan was to storm the presidential compound, win over the military, and install their own civilian leader. They hoped to gain control of the country by New Year's Day.

The head of the group was Lamin Sanneh, a bulky 35-year-old who had commanded an elite military unit charged with protecting the president, until he had fallen out with Jammeh the year before and taken refuge in the suburbs of Baltimore, Maryland. To the men in the graveyard, Sanneh seemed perfectly suited to the mission. He had been trained at the best foreign military academies and was familiar with the inner workings of Jammeh's security apparatus, from the armaments in the State House's guard towers to the routes taken by the presidential motorcade.

"Gentlemen," Sanneh called out, in the manner of a general briefing his troops before battle. They would split into two teams, he reminded them: Bravo would wait for Alpha's first gunshot before mounting its attack. To the men's frustration, they had misplaced one of their two pairs of night-vision goggles. But there was no time to waste.

They prayed, then formed a huddle. Together, they whispered: "Let's go take back our country."

"A BANANA SHOVED INTO the mouth of Senegal"—so goes the polite version of a local saying that describes the Gambia's appearance on a map. The country, home to fewer than 2 million people, is a narrow strip of territory carved out of the banks of its namesake river. The Atlantic forms the western edge; Senegal surrounds the rest.

Weak borders and weak governments still characterize much of West Africa, and the coup d'état brewing in the graveyard would not be the Gambia's first. Sanneh was on summer break from middle school in 1994 when, one morning, a group of junior army officers angry about their low salaries seized the national radio station, the airport, and government buildings in Banjul. The incumbent president, Dawda Jawara, who had led the country since independence, found safety on a docked U.S. warship while his guards evacuated the State House. When the disgruntled officers arrived, Andrew Winter, then the U.S. ambassador to the Gambia, told me, "I think much to their surprise, it was theirs." At about 6 o'clock that evening, an announcement came on the radio: A four-member group called the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council, or AFPRC, had taken over. Its chair was Yahya Jammeh, then a 29-year-old army lieutenant who was little known outside the barracks.

Under Jawara, the Gambia had been a bright spot in post-independence Africa. From the start of decolonization, in the 1950s, until the end of his tenure, leaders in continental West Africa were more likely to be ousted by members of the military than to lose power in elections. During that period, the 14 other countries in the region together experienced 35 successful coups. But Jawara, over his three decades in office, fostered a multiparty democracy, tolerated a free press, and outlawed the death penalty. Before the AFPRC takeover, the Gambia was Africa's longest-surviving

democracy—and Jawara was the last of its hopeful crop of 1950s and '60s nationalist leaders still in office.

Critics, however, saw Jawara as a distant elitist who spent too much time playing statesman abroad and not enough time combatting poverty at home. The objections seem to have resonated with Jammeh, who grew up shuttling between relatives in the provinces after his mother left the family and his father died. When the shabbily dressed boy earned a spot at a prestigious high school in Banjul, a childhood friend recalled, he began carrying around an opposition newspaper and once got into a fistfight with the son of the justice minister.

Jammeh joined the gendarmerie after graduation, eventually rising to become an instructor. According to Essa Bokarr Sey, who lived in the barracks with him for three years and went on to serve as his ambassador to the United States, Jammeh used to read Marx in his downtime, and would flag down ministers' cars as if to ask for a ride, only to berate them for being corrupt. "*Na polotik nomo you dey talk*," another instructor used to tell Jammeh, pidgin English for "All you talk about is politics."

A member of the Jola people—a small ethnic group that was the last in the region to convert to Islam—Jammeh stood out on the base for his extreme superstition. According to Sey, Jammeh claimed that he could cure fellow soldiers' sprains just by touching them, and at night he would rub himself with leaves to ward off spirits. He also had a reputation as a small-time bully. At the base's gate, he once made a pregnant visitor dance like a monkey until she fainted. After Jammeh locked Sey out of the dormitory one evening, Sey wrote Jammeh a letter calling him a dictator. "I am the first person who used that word for him," Sey told me.

Jammeh was commissioned by the Gambian National Army in 1989, and soon began serving as a presidential guard. In 1993, a year after being

**AFTER WINNING
A THIRD TERM,
YAHYA JAMMEH
LED HIS COUNTRY
WITH NEWFOUND
BRAVADO—
AND ERRATICISM.**





unsuccessful coups in 1994, 1995, 2000, and 2006. After the 2006 attempt—allegedly led by the former chief of the defense staff—Jammeh announced a crackdown. “I will set an example that will put a definitive end to these ruthless, callous, and shameless acts of treachery and sabotage,” he said. “I have warned Gambians long enough.”

In a classic 1999 article in the journal *International Security*, the Rand Corporation analyst James Quinlivan coined the term *coup-proofing* to describe the measures a leader fearing military overthrow might take to protect himself. Among them is creating a system for enforcing

loyalty. With enemies lurking everywhere, Jammeh established a National Intelligence Agency and a network of informants inside the bureaucracy. Denunciations eventually became so common that the government had to pass a law prohibiting false accusations. Intelligence officers would take perceived enemies to an off-the-books detention center at the agency’s headquarters, which still bore a sign reading GAMBIA PRODUCE MARKETING BOARD. There, according to a report by the United Nations special rapporteur on torture, they would be punched, burned, or electrocuted. One former detainee told me he had been whipped with a tractor belt. He showed me his bloodied shirt and photographs of his scarred back.

A group of some 20 soldiers called the “Junglers,” which officially functioned as a border-patrol unit near Jammeh’s hometown of Kanilai, carried out the regime’s dirty work. A defector from the group says the Junglers drove around in Jeeps and pickup trucks wearing black SWAT-team uniforms and wielding weapons from Iran. Most smoked marijuana and drank on the job. Around 2004, according to Human Rights Watch, the group’s commander allegedly started ordering the assassinations of regime opponents, working from a list of names provided by the president.

Jammeh also cultivated a special military force, bound to him through ethnic

promoted to lieutenant, he enrolled in a four-month military-police course at Fort McClellan, in Alabama, where he struck up a friendship with the base’s foreign-liaison officer, Major Fouad Aide. Aide liked to tell the story of how he learned that his mentee had seized control of a country: He answered his phone one day and heard “Please hold for the head of state.” He assumed the call was a prank. Then Jammeh came on the line, inviting him to the Gambia.

Initially, Jammeh signaled that the new regime would not descend into military dictatorship. Labeling the AFPRC “soldiers with a difference,” he vowed to return to the barracks “as soon as we have set things right.” In a gesture of frugality, he promised to auction off the Jawara government’s Mercedes-Benzes, and showed up at rallies in a Mitsubishi SUV.

Despite his rhetoric, Jammeh soon began to follow the region’s standard post-coup playbook. In 1996, two years after the coup, in response to international pressure, he agreed to hold presidential elections and retired from the army, exchanging his red beret and fatigues for a brimless cap and flowing gown. On election day, soldiers at polling stations directed people how to vote, while the leading opposition candidate hid in the Senegalese Embassy, fearing assassination. Jammeh won handily.

Military governments do military things, and the Gambia’s once-open society began to contract. The police, even when only on crowd-control duty at a soccer stadium, were armed with rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. So perhaps it was inevitable that when a group of students gathered in April 2000 to protest the alleged rape of a teenage girl by a security officer, the police opened fire. At least 14 people were killed.

Nonetheless, in 2001, Jammeh won a second term. He was popular for the paved roads, hospitals, and schools his government had built. Classrooms, for once, were furnished; no longer did students have to lug their own desks and chairs to school. But while international observers declared the election “free and fair,” the political playing field was anything but level. Police raided journalists’ homes and arrested activists. Jammeh toured the country in a motorcade bristling with rocket launchers, reportedly distributing cash to the crowds that greeted him.

JAMMEH FEARED THE barracks more than the ballot—with good reason. The year after he took power, he had two members of his own party arrested for plotting counterattacks, and caused a third to flee the country. Various schemers within the military launched

ties—another coup-proofing strategy. The unit, known as the State Guards, was charged with protecting the country's most strategically valuable points: the State House; the president's villa in Kanilai; and Denton Bridge, the sole roadway connecting the capital to the Gambian mainland. Jammeh filled its ranks with Jolas, his ethnic brethren.

Jammeh won yet another term in 2006, and started leading his country with newfound bravado—and erraticism. He upgraded his Mitsubishi to a black stretch Hummer and tossed biscuits to crowds from its sunroof, sending children scrambling. (Some were hit by the motorcade and killed.) His title grew to "His Excellency Sheikh Professor Alhaji Doctor." He unveiled his own herbal cure for HIV/AIDS, a green paste he rubbed on patients' skin, and threatened to behead gay Gambians. In 2009, his security forces kidnapped hundreds of people accused of witchcraft and forced them to drink a hallucinogenic potion. That year, Jammeh survived another coup attempt, and two years later, he won a fourth election. He told an interviewer afterward, "If I have to rule this country for 1 billion years, I will."

JAMMEH WAS THUS putting Lamin Sanneh in a position of considerable trust when he made him commander of the State Guards, in July 2012. Perhaps the president saw himself in the young lieutenant colonel. Born in a rural village not far from Kanilai, Sanneh had joined the military out of high school and worked as an instructor at the same barracks Jammeh had. When the military opened a new training school in Kanilai, Sanneh was picked as its chief instructor.

Like Jammeh, Sanneh went abroad for military training, first to Sandhurst, in the United Kingdom, and then to the National Defense University, in Washington, D.C., as a counterterrorism fellow. He lived with his wife, Hoja, and two of their children in a condominium in Arlington, Virginia, where their lives revolved around Sanneh's academic work. On weekend mornings, after cooking breakfast for the family, Sanneh would head to the condominium's business center to write. When he tired of typing, Hoja took dictation.

In his master's thesis, about drug trafficking in West Africa, Sanneh trod

carefully when discussing the trade's links to Gambian officials, making sure to cite pro-government newspapers as sources and to omit all mention of Jammeh. His adviser, Jeffrey Meiser, recalled that among the bright young officers from around the world, Sanneh had distinguished himself. At his graduation ceremony, as he shook hands with General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Sanneh stood out in his red full dress, a gold aiguillette dangling from his chest.

Just after returning to the Gambia, Sanneh received his new assignment running the State Guards. He had not been expecting the promotion, he told Meiser in an e-mail. "Very busy and challenging, taking care of the President's security," he wrote, adding that he thought he would stay in the position for the foreseeable future.

Sanneh worked seven days a week at the State House, and often didn't get home until 1 a.m. Some nights, he slept at the office. But the job was prestigious, and gave him considerable face time with Jammeh. As a former colleague told me, Sanneh would chat and joke with the president over cups of green tea. Sanneh knew, of course, that such proximity could be dangerous: Mile 2, a cramped, mosquito-filled prison near Banjul, housed no shortage of erstwhile insiders. He protected himself by taking detailed notes of his daily activities, creating a time-stamped record in the event that he was accused of anything insidious.

He was right to worry. His problems began when his boss, General Saul Badjie—Jammeh's closest military adviser—told him to fire subordinates without cause. When Sanneh refused, Badjie started looking into his background, and found out he was a Mandinka—the most prevalent of the Gambia's ethnic groups, and a regular target of Jammeh's sniping—despite hailing from a district with a high concentration of Jolas. In February 2013, just seven months after he had started, Sanneh was expelled from the State Guards and demoted to major. The next

month, he was dismissed from the army. He wrote to Meiser, requesting a letter of recommendation—"urgently"—for a master's program in Taiwan.

Sanneh soon learned from neighbors that his house appeared to be under surveillance, and not long after, he got word that he should leave the Gambia immediately. He fled with his wife and children to Dakar, Senegal. Even there, he did not feel safe—an online radio station had announced that Jammeh's men were looking for him—so he applied for

refugee status at the American Embassy, and in the summer of 2013 he resettled with his family near Baltimore.

He looked for a job, woke up early to catch Manchester United games, and tried to turn his master's thesis into an academic article—in his revisions, he implicated Jammeh in the drug trafficking. Eventually, he was hired as

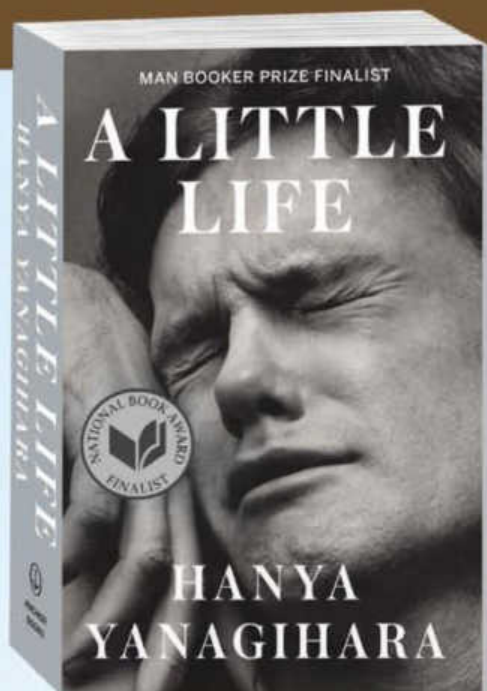
an information-technology instructor at Baltimore City Community College, making \$28 an hour. But his mind was on the Gambia. One day, he placed a phone call to a man he had met in the Dakar airport on his way to the United States, a Gambian political activist named Banka Manneh who lived in Atlanta. The two complained about Jammeh's regime for a while before Sanneh made a proposal. "I think we can solve this problem," he said.

AS AN EXILE and a prominent critic of Jammeh, Manneh was used to being approached by leaders of far-fetched coup plots, and he always turned them down. But Sanneh was insistent: Peaceful resistance would never do the trick. Jammeh must be overthrown. When Manneh got a similar call from Njaga Jagne, a high-school acquaintance who had left the Gambia 20 years earlier, he decided to put the two men in touch.

The group of would-be revolutionaries soon grew to include two more expatriates, both of whom had served in the U.S. Army. They called themselves the Gambia Freedom League.

The men started holding hour-long conference calls every other Saturday

THE OPERATION MAY HAVE HAD A WHIFF OF NAÏVETÉ, BUT IT WAS CERTAINLY BETTER ORGANIZED THAN THE COUP THAT HAD BROUGHT THE PRESIDENT TO POWER.



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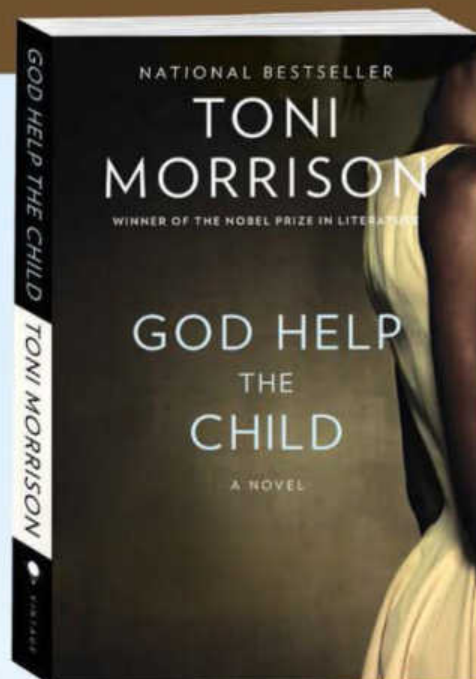
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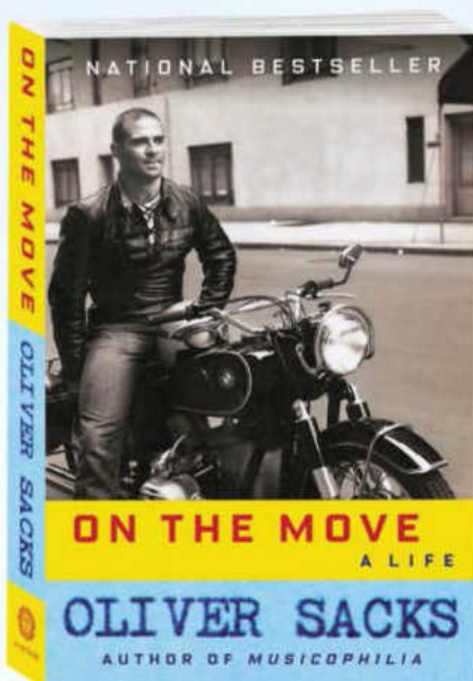
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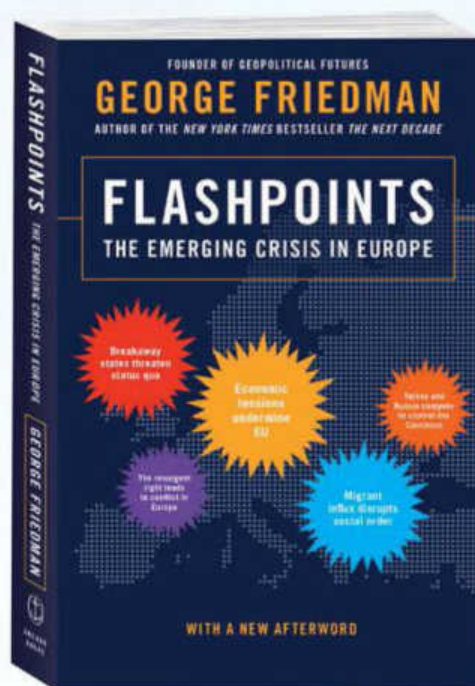
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evening. At first, these were relaxed affairs, filled with jokes about hometown rivalries. The members who had served in the military, and possessed the sense of punctuality to match, playfully scolded Manneh for joining the calls late. They eventually adopted code names: “Fox,” “Dave,” “Bandit,” “X.”

Sanneh drafted a six-page document that he shared with the others on Google Drive: “Military Strategy for Operation Gambian Freedom.” It sketched out an operation designed to remove Jammeh and his inner circle. The group would work with “local partners and agents” to acquire real-time intelligence about Jammeh’s location. Their preference would be to arrest him, but, the document stated, “in the event the capture fails for unforeseen reasons, he must be killed.” A flowchart that would not be out of place in a Pentagon PowerPoint presentation diagrammed the “ways,” “means,” and “ends” of the operation. Above it, eight assumptions were listed—among them, that there would be no leaks by the local partners, and no resistance from security forces.

Tasked with fund-raising, Manneh approached Cherno Njie, a real-estate developer originally from the Gambia who lived in Austin, Texas. Njie had done well enough to send his son to private school in Austin and buy a million-dollar home in a gated community. He had also funded some of Manneh’s activist efforts, paying for his travel to Brussels to lobby European Union officials to levy sanctions against the Gambia, and bankrolling a radio station in Senegal that, until the signal was jammed, broadcast anti-Jammeh propaganda across the border. When Manneh called Njie asking whether he wanted to finance a more radical venture, he says, he found Njie receptive.

Manneh also busied himself with post-coup planning. He jotted down notes in his car during breaks from his job in construction, and typed away on his laptop at restaurants around Atlanta, eventually e-mailing the group a document titled “Transition Into the Third Republic.” It outlined a two-year interim period with Cherno Njie as president, after which elections would be held. “Another clarion call has been issued to all Gambian citizens and people of Gambian descent to rescue their country,” the document began. “As concerned



citizens, we have decided to stake our life and resources to answer the call.”

By the late summer of 2014, the Gambia Freedom League had added a recruit from Seattle and a U.S. Army veteran from Minneapolis named Papa Faal. Dawda Jawara, the ousted president of the Gambia, was Faal’s great-uncle, and during a failed coup attempt in 1981—which took place while Jawara was in London for the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana—a 13-year-old Faal was held hostage at gunpoint with his family. In a memoir published in 2013, he had inveighed against the leaders of the plot, claiming that coups sow “the seeds of a future conflict or coup.”

But like the others, Faal had concluded that nonviolent methods of removing Jammeh had run their course.

Now, on the biweekly conference calls, Sanneh laid out a detailed blueprint for capturing or killing Jammeh. “Chuck,” as the plan referred to him, would be removed in one of four ways. The first three involved roadside ambushes at various points that Jammeh’s motorcade was known to pass. The group assumed that the lead vehicle would be disabled with a .50-caliber sniper rifle. Then the convoy would halt and the fighters would persuade the presidential bodyguards to drop their weapons.

The fourth and most dangerous option was a direct assault on the State House. In that scenario, the group would split into three teams, with Alpha going through the front gate and Bravo securing the rear one. Charlie would act as an auxiliary, swinging into place as needed. They hoped to negotiate with the guards, rather than fight them. But they would shoot their way in if necessary. Sanneh labeled gates and guard towers on a Google Earth satellite image of the compound. Faal printed out the map and put it in a manila folder, which he marked TOP SECRET in black ink.

Each scenario counted on 160 Gambian soldiers joining the mission. Sanneh assured the group that, as a popular former instructor under whom hundreds of soldiers had passed, he could deliver on this promise. In the event that the plot failed, the fighters would discard their weapons, strip off their armor to reveal civilian clothes, and blend into the streets.

But if all went according to plan, Cherno Njie, waiting safely away from the action, would call up the commander of the Gambian military and persuade him to join their cause. Then the military would secure the airport, power plants, ports, and border posts. Gamtel, the national telecom company, would also be taken over, and cellphone service would be shut down to disrupt communication within the regime. Once the state radio and television services were in friendly hands, the new government would be announced on the airwaves, with Manneh serving as its international spokesman. It would be a classic bloodless coup.

The operation may have had a whiff of naïveté, but it was certainly better organized than the coup that had brought Jammeh to power, the planning of which, by some accounts, had begun only the night before.

THE COUP WOULD require considerable firepower—which the men could acquire legally in America. A spreadsheet they kept called for 28 rifles, eight pistols, four machine guns, and 15 sights. In a row listing two .50-caliber sniper rifles was a note: “NOT really necessary but could be very useful” (the group ended up splurging on them). Faal bought eight M4 semi-automatic rifles, splitting the purchases

between two different gun dealers in Minneapolis. Jagne and Alagie Barrow, one of the Army veterans, also bought at least eight weapons each, including three Smith & Wesson rifles that Barrow picked up from a gun store near his house in Tennessee.

Jagne and Barrow told Banka Manneh that their purchases had gotten them flagged, presumably by the FBI, which conducts background checks on gun buyers. So Jagne asked Manneh to buy more weapons himself, directing him over the phone as Manneh clicked through an online gun store that shipped to a pawnshop outside Atlanta.

Besides guns and ammunition, the group obtained a platoon’s worth of equipment for the 20 or so expatriate fighters whom Sanneh thought he could ultimately recruit to participate in the operation. They collected eight walkie-talkies for communication during the raid, and the two pairs of night-vision goggles. Sanneh acquired satellite phones so they could speak with the outside world after cell service was shut down in the Gambia. A budget for the operation projected more than \$220,000 in expenses.

To get the equipment to the Gambia, the men would ship it in barrels under false names that sounded Jola, which they believed would reduce the chances of inspection. After one member of the group arranged a successful test shipment of two weapons, Faal broke down his eight rifles in his garage. He put the parts inside cardboard boxes, which he slid into plastic barrels and concealed with blankets, T-shirts, and shoes from Goodwill. He brought the barrels to a local shipping company and sent them off to the port of Banjul.

In late October, Alagie Barrow flew to Dakar, half a day’s drive from the Gambia’s northern border, to act as an advance man. The others tied up their lives in America. Njaga Jagne let his ex-wife know that he would be out of town for a few weeks and tried, unsuccessfully, to rearrange their custody schedule to get extra days with their 9-year-old son. Papa Faal told the community college where he was teaching

that he would be taking the next semester off, and set up his bills for automatic payment. His wife happened to be planning to take their infant daughter to the Gambia in December to see family; he tried to change her mind but gave up when she grew suspicious. He deflected questions about his own travel plans by saying he was going on a business trip.

On December 3, Faal flew to Dakar alone, then took a taxi to the Gambia. Jagne soon followed. Along with Barrow, they rented SUVs and fenced-off safe houses, each in a different Banjul suburb, and picked up the weapons from the port. The three started conducting reconnaissance of the ambush sites and casing the State House. Barrow shared some unsettling news: While he was in Dakar, the FBI had reached him by phone and asked him where he was. He said he had refused to answer.

Sanneh had a similar encounter. In early December, after he bought a ticket to Dakar, three FBI agents arrived at his doorstep. He invited them into his living room, while his wife listened from the staircase. We know a lot of Gambians oppose Jammeh’s

rule, they said. Are you going to the Gambia? Sanneh assured them that he was merely visiting family in Senegal. After the agents left, he speculated to his wife that he had popped up on an FBI watch list because of his refugee status. He told her not to worry. A few weeks later, he boarded the plane as planned.

The other members were less successful. According to Manneh, after the recruit from Seattle told his wife he was going to the Gambia, she told his mother, and his mother confiscated his passport and made him cancel his plane ticket. The remaining U.S. Army veteran also bailed.

Manneh would not be joining the group in Africa either. He had discovered that Njie had put together his own transition plan, in which Manneh would not serve as the group’s spokesman. Manneh confided his concerns about the change to Sanneh, who would hear none of it. Soon, Manneh was excluded from the conference calls.

AFTER ONE RECRUIT TOLD HIS WIFE HE WAS GOING TO THE GAMBIA, SHE TOLD HIS MOTHER, AND HIS MOTHER CONFISCATED HIS PASSPORT.

A SPRAWLING, cacophonous city with flights volleying in from Europe and North America, Dakar is a fitting place to muster an international crew to overthrow an African government. In late December, at a budget guesthouse on the outskirts of the city, Sanneh assembled five former soldiers who had also fallen out of favor with President Jammeh. After trying in vain for a few days to expand the team—and joining up with Cherno Njie—they headed for the Gambia, where one more expatriate would meet them. They traveled light and crossed the border separately; those who risked being recognized avoided checkpoints.

barrels entering his house, Barrow told his neighbors he was starting a business. As planned, the group collected intelligence. The members who had served in the Gambian military plied their former colleagues for updates about their bosses and the whereabouts of their units.

Sanneh cultivated confederates inside the regime. His biggest get was a presidential bodyguard who could provide him with Jammeh's real-time location, down to the vehicle he would be riding in. Another insider told him that someone at the State House had received a text from a Senegalese number advising that plotters were in the Gambia. The insider said the warning wasn't being taken seriously. Still, the news

civilian casualties among the crowds that would inevitably line up to cheer on the presidential motorcade. Sanneh called off the attack.

Sitting in leather chairs and on the living-room carpet, the group weighed its options. Some argued for lying low until Jammeh returned from abroad, but Sanneh convinced the men that now was the time to seize power. With Jammeh gone, the plan shifted to kidnapping General Saul Badjie, Sanneh's former boss at the State House.

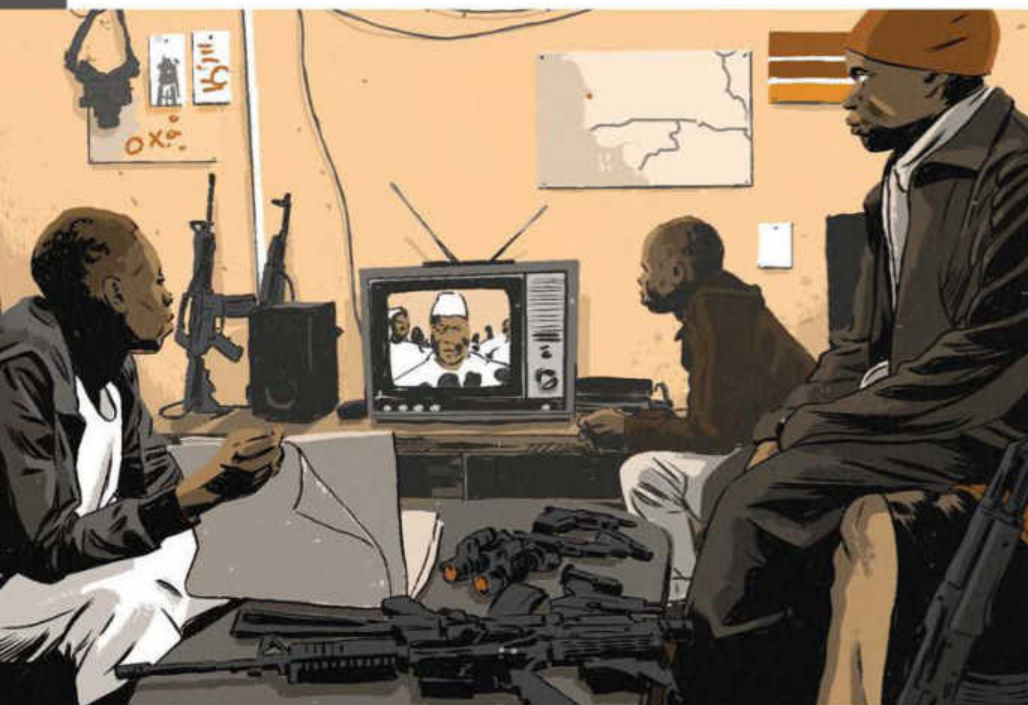
On Saturday, December 27, three men were assigned to drive around looking for Badjie. They finally spotted him while parked outside a supermarket, but one of the three was inside buying something, and by the time he returned to the car, Badjie had driven off.

On Sunday, Sanneh told the group that he had a new plan: Another ally in the military, a captain, would meet with them late that night outside Banjul and join them in securing the State House. Once again, the group gathered at a safe house and waited. Once again, they had to abort. The captain was not answering Sanneh's phone calls. Morale was low, and some privately doubted that Sanneh had the support he said he did. He told the men to go to bed.

Most slept late on Monday. Some showered or sipped tea. At the dining-room table of the safe house where he was staying, Sanneh met with some of the other members of the Gambia Freedom League to de-

bate whether to attack the State House, where General Badjie stayed when Jammeh was away. One of the men Sanneh had summoned to Dakar, a former army captain named Mustapha Faal (no relation to Papa Faal), thought it insane to try to take the State House with so few men. "I'm not here to commit suicide," he said.

Sanneh pushed back. Every extra day the men hid in the Gambia, the odds that they might be discovered grew. Calling off the mission would mean not only throwing away more than a year and a half of planning, but also failing those inside the regime whom Sanneh had persuaded to join



Bai Lowe, a former Jungler who had spilled secrets about the hit squad to the public, was the last to go. "The Gambia needs you," Sanneh had told him a few weeks earlier, when he called to explain the mission. Soon a DHL package containing a plane ticket had arrived at Lowe's home in Hannover, Germany. In Dakar, he entrusted his passport to a caretaker at the guesthouse, instructing him to burn the document if he didn't pick it up within two months. Then he walked across the border alone, in the dark.

There were 11 of them now in the Gambia, divided among the three safe houses. Guns and equipment filled their bedrooms. To explain the

spooked Sanneh, and he wondered about a leak.

Everyone expected Jammeh to come out of his house on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, at which point they could lay an ambush. But he never did, and the day after Christmas, a Friday, Sanneh learned that Jammeh would be leaving the country early the next morning. That night, the group gathered at one of the safe houses to prepare for an ambush near Denton Bridge. As they geared up, however, Sanneh was told by one of his sources that Jammeh's departure had been pushed back to 10 a.m. The timing would rob them of the cover of darkness, and risk

the riskiest venture of their lives. More practically, Sanneh faced pressure from Chern Njie, the would-be president, who, as a businessman rather than a soldier, was uncomfortable living among so many weapons and wanted to act quickly.

Sanneh's side prevailed, and Mustapha Faal announced that he was leaving. "Don't tell the boys," Sanneh said. "If you tell them, they'll follow you."

In the afternoon, Sanneh summoned everyone else to his place. After midnight, he announced, they would attack the State House. Njie, Alagie Barrow, and Dawda Bojang, another of Sanneh's former associates who had moved to Germany, would stay behind at one of the safe houses. The rest of the men loaded their weapons and gear into two cars and headed into the capital.

THEY MADE IT PAST the Denton Bridge checkpoint before 7 p.m., when the more scrutinous military would take over from the police. With hours to kill, they drove aimlessly through the streets of Banjul, stopping for Coca-Cola, goat meat, and evening prayers. A New Year's festival was taking place, and they distracted themselves with the masked dancers and drummers.

Around 1 a.m., as the moon sank below the horizon, the cars turned into the graveyard. Sanneh announced two surprises. First, General Badjie was not at the State House, but more than 20 miles south, closer to the Senegalese border. Not to worry, he said. Soldiers were standing by at the State House and near the airport, ready to help seize power. Second, Sanneh introduced a last-minute recruit, who stepped out of the woods: a young Gambian soldier who would go by the code name "Junior." By now, everyone realized that Mustapha Faal had abandoned the group.

Sanneh would head up team Alpha, attacking the front gate of the compound along with Junior, Lowe, Jagne, and a young man named Modou Njie (no relation to Chern Njie), who had worked as Sanneh's aide at the State House. Papa Faal and two former Gambian soldiers, Alagie Nyass and Musa Sarr, would make up team Bravo, attacking from the rear. With fewer men than expected, there would be no team Charlie.

As some of the men later recounted,

Alpha and Bravo each got into a car and drove toward the State House—windows up, headlights off. When Alpha reached the outer entrance, everyone but Modou Njie got out of the car. Lowe raised his gun at two scared sentries at a guard post. "We're not going to kill you," he said. "Drop your guns." They complied. Sanneh radioed the news to Bravo. Then Njie rammed the car through a series of barriers, getting deep inside the compound.

As Lowe and the rest of Alpha advanced on foot toward one of the inner gates surrounding Jammeh's residence, they were spotted by a guard in a tower. The guard opened fire. Lowe knew him, and climbed up the tower to negotiate. But before he could persuade him to stand down, the guard fired his weapon again. Lowe returned fire and retreated.

Within moments, Lowe heard another shot—fired, he suspected, by the same guard—and watched as Sanneh crumpled to the ground. Lowe tried to drag his body to safety, but it was too heavy. Nor could he get Sanneh's phone, which contained all his communications with the government insiders. The bullets were still coming.

When the men in Bravo heard the gunfire, their car was pulling up next to the back gate of the State House, where the team was supposed to ensure that the soldiers fleeing Alpha's assault left unarmed. Before the car could stop, it started taking shots from a guard tower. "Get out!" yelled Sarr. He and Faal fired at the tower—Faal with one of the .50-caliber rifles—but in the darkness, it was hard to know where to aim. *It sure would be nice to have night-vision goggles,* Faal thought to himself.

Nyass drove the car toward the gate, intending to burst through it; a blast of gunfire from the tower stopped him. As he climbed out of the car, he was met with a hail of bullets. Sarr, whose boot had been grazed and whose body armor had taken a direct shot, radioed Alpha to report that Nyass had been killed. He heard only static in response. He and Faal decided it was time to flee.

Faal entered the courtyard of a hospital neighboring the State House, took off his vest, and laid his rifle next to a

tree. He sliced off his cargo pockets with his knife to make his pants look less like combat gear, and crouched behind a concrete wall to wait for morning.

Sarr jumped a fence and headed for the beach. Pretending to be a guard looking for the intruders, he pointed his rifle left and right as he ran. He waded into the ocean to hide, later burying his weapons in the sand and escaping Banjul.

On the other side of the State House, with Sanneh dead, the remnants of Alpha also decided to retreat. Modou Njie had become separated from the group. When Lowe reached him by cellphone, he said he had made it into the office of the commander of the State Guards. Everyone inside was confused.

Lowe told him to come back to the outer gate.

When Modou Njie didn't show up, Lowe called again, but someone else answered. "Where are you guys?" a man asked. Lowe recognized the voice of the current commander of the State Guards. Thinking quickly, Lowe answered that rebel reinforcements had arrived and were waiting to slaughter anyone who left. The gambit bought him enough time to escape. He lost track of the others. Junior, he would later learn, also managed to get out safely. But Modou Njie was captured, and at some point during the chaos, Jagne was killed.

Lowe hopped over the State House fence, stripped off his armor, and threw down his gun. Troops were gathering on the nearby beach. He caught a taxi and instructed the driver to head across Denton Bridge. At the checkpoint, Lowe recognized some of the soldiers, but they seemed not to notice him. A small bribe to expedite the process, and the car was through.

Lowe's taxi made its way toward Senegal. At another checkpoint, the police asked the driver to give a ride to a soldier. For the 10 miles the soldier was in the car, Lowe pretended to sleep in the backseat. When the driver dropped Lowe off near the border, Lowe gave him 50 euros and told him not to tell anyone what he'd seen.

Back at the safe house, Chern Njie was waiting for news with Alagie

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Barrow and Dawda Bojang. Their radio had not picked up any signal from the group. But then they got a call from Lowe, informing them that the operation had been aborted. They tossed some weapons in their car and took a back road across the Senegalese border. As they escaped, Barrow called Banka Manneh in Atlanta. It was the first Manneh had heard from him in some time. “This thing failed,” Barrow said. Sanneh and Jagne, he added, “couldn’t make it.” Manneh would later learn that Nyass had also been killed.

The day after the attack, the names of the dead began to circulate on online radio stations and on Facebook. At home in Maryland, Sanneh’s widow, Hoja, refused to believe that her husband had taken part in the coup, never mind that he was dead. She tried calling and texting Sanneh, and even logged in to his Verizon account to see his cellphone records. She turned to Manneh for help, knowing that he talked frequently with her husband. When he tried Sanneh’s number, someone who claimed to be a cousin answered, asking Manneh to leave a message because Sanneh was “quite busy right now.” The phone had been taken by the National Intelligence Agency.

HOURS AFTER THE attempted coup, Banjul awoke to a military lockdown. The streets crawled with soldiers moving from house to house in search of hidden attackers. New checkpoints appeared. Businesses closed. A fire truck was summoned to the State House to hose blood off the concrete.

When Papa Faal, still hiding in the courtyard, heard the call to prayer, he approached a hospital visitor and persuaded him to swap clothes. He put on the man’s jeans, flip-flops, and dirty undershirt and slipped into the streets of Banjul. He was still unsure whether the coup had succeeded or failed—maybe Sanneh’s promised reinforcements had shown up after all—until he walked back to the State House and saw a white body bag being carried out and the vice president’s silver car arriving. The regime was intact. State radio played traditional music, and the government released a statement: “Contrary to rumors being circulated, peace and calm continue to prevail in the Gambia.”

Denton Bridge was shut down, as was a ferry that provided the only other way back to the mainland. Faal wandered around the city, trying not to make too much or too little eye contact with the soldiers he passed on the street. He wished he had the anti-anxiety pills he had been prescribed for post-traumatic stress disorder after he came back from Afghanistan. With the port still closed, he stayed the night at the house of a man he befriended at a mosque.

The next morning, the ferry started running again, and Faal took it to the north bank of the Gambia River before riding in shared taxis—at one point, like Lowe, seated next to a Gambian soldier—all the way back to Dakar. When other passengers gossiped about a terrorist attack in Banjul, he kept quiet.

It was nearly midnight on New Year’s Eve when Faal arrived, and the American Embassy was closed. Frantic, he waved down a guard. “I’m a U.S. citizen,” he said. “I need to talk to somebody inside.” He was led into the embassy and introduced to a State Department official and an FBI agent. They gave him a slice of pizza and a bottle of water as he told them everything. “You know this is a crime, right?” the agent asked.

IT ONLY TAKES one conspirator to betray a conspiracy,” cautions *How to Stage a Military Coup*, a book that Alagie Barrow kept in his house. Had the Gambia Freedom League been betrayed?

Papa Faal thought so. The tower that fired at Bravo team, he said, was staffed with more guards than usual. Word of the attack could have been leaked by one of Sanneh’s intended recruits, or by someone in the Gambian diaspora, where—despite the men’s careful planning—rumors of an impending coup had been circulating for weeks. Two weeks before the attack, Pa Nderry M’ Bai, a Gambian radio host based in North Carolina, posted a picture of Jammeh for his thousands of Facebook followers with the caption “Something big is brewing.”

A warning could also have come

through more-official channels. In May 2015, *The Washington Post* revealed that the FBI had notified the State Department of Sanneh’s suspicious travel plans, and the State Department had passed on the information to “authorities in a West African country near Gambia”—read: Senegal. But two Senegalese foreign-policy officials I spoke with flatly rejected the idea that their government would tip off Jammeh.

Relations with the Gambia are so hostile, one said, that Senegal would be happy to see him ousted. “But of course we can’t admit that,” he added.

Bai Lowe told me that everyone he encountered at the State House seemed surprised. Had the regime known about the attack in advance, he argued, the group

would never have been able to make it through the checkpoints into Banjul, let alone disarm two sentries. Perhaps the ultimate cause of the coup’s failure was not what the Gambian military knew about Sanneh, then, but what Sanneh thought he knew about the Gambian military. “He believed all these army boys were so tired of Jammeh that any day anything like this started, whether they knew about it or not, they would be happy to join the other side,” Banka Manneh said. “I think he had convinced himself of that.”

AFTER PAPA FAAL returned to the U.S., the FBI arrested him, along with Chernon Njie and Alagie Barrow (both of whom declined to be interviewed for this article). The FBI also picked up Manneh. Each man faces up to five years in prison for conspiring to violate the Neutrality Act, a 1794 law that bars U.S. citizens from taking up arms against any foreign country with which the United States is at peace, and up to 20 years for buying weapons to do so. Faal, Barrow, and Manneh have pleaded guilty and are awaiting sentencing. As of this writing, Chernon Njie has not entered a plea.

Bai Lowe and Dawda Bojang both returned home to Germany, where they are awaiting the results of their asylum applications. When I met Lowe

“HE HAD A BRIGHT FUTURE HERE. HE HAD A FAMILY HERE. HE HAD EVERYTHING HE NEEDED. WHY WOULD HE EVEN GO?”

[REDACTED]

in Hannover, in May, he refused to eat or drink in public, fearful that he might be poisoned; he had heard that one of Jammeh's agents was in the country looking for him.

Inside the Gambia, the crack-down was expansive. The government rounded up relatives of Gambia Freedom League members, including Sanneh's elderly mother and Lowe's 16-year-old son, and jailed them without charges. Lowe told me that Gambian police even showed up at his 7-year-old daughter's school, in a border town in Senegal. The headmistress scared them off by calling the gendarmerie. A Gambian court-martial convicted six soldiers for their roles in the coup attempt—Modou Njie (who had been captured at the State House), four of the insiders Sanneh had been courting, and one soldier accused of displaying cowardice before the enemy. Njie and two others were sentenced to death. As for the three men killed in the attack, the Gambian government never released their bodies, although pictures of their bloodied corpses surfaced online.

In January, Banka Manneh drove from Atlanta to a mosque in Maryland to pay his respects to Sanneh's family. He recited the Koran and prayed with Sanneh's friends and relatives. Hoja, Sanneh's widow, wore a traditional white mourning dress.

"People still ask me, 'Why did he go?'" Hoja told me. "He had a bright future here. He had a family here. He had everything he needed. Why would he even go? I don't have the answer to that."

WHEN I VISITED the Gambia last summer, life seemed to have returned to normal. But according to opposition leaders, the coup attempt had done lasting damage. Ousainou Darboe, the head of the United Democratic Party, told me that Jammeh had used the attack to justify more repression. "Any efforts to change the regime by extralegal means take us three steps backward," he said. Darboe suspected that the National Intelligence Agency had put the opposition under increased surveillance. He'd noticed a suspicious phone-card vendor and other "strange faces" showing up near his house.

I met O. J. Jallow, a former agriculture minister under Dawda Jawara and

THE WREN

First it flies to a side rail. Then a fern.
Then a fern, like a fountain, spilling out.
Can a curse be said to be song? Can it?
How can such a quick thing, tail tipped up, brown
as a bun, on wings too busy to see,
be so badly named? Troglodytidae.
The term circles back to us—cave dweller,
brute recluse. Though a wren's beak curves, like a
scimitar, this one just wants its porch back.
Now it's vanished down our hollow eave spout,
from whose depths returns—
says the book—a loud
and often complex song. No, it is a curse.

—David Baker

David Baker's most recent collection is Scavenger Loop (2015).

now the leader of the People's Progressive Party, in his living room. He knew some of the plotters, and was baffled by their involvement. "I don't know what convinced them that the military strategy is more effective than the peaceful democratic process," he said.

Jallow had been arrested 20 times since Jammeh took power, and his left eye was still injured from a beating he'd taken during one of those arrests. Even so, he believed that Jammeh was vulnerable. A drought, combined with the effects of the nearby Ebola epidemic on tourism, had devastated the Gambia's already meager economy, driving citizens to emigrate in record numbers. Given the widespread discontent, he predicted, Jammeh could lose the next presidential election, which is scheduled for December, and be forced by the international community to step down.

One Western diplomat in Banjul scoffed at that notion. More likely, in his view, was that the president would finally fall to a luckier band of revolutionaries. "At some point," he said, "someone will get it right."

In July, President Jammeh, in what he advertised as a gesture of goodwill, let more than 200 prisoners out of Mile 2, including the family members of the Gambia Freedom League. The next week, the government held

a "solidarity march" featuring some of the released prisoners, which began in front of Arch 22, a dilapidated monument in Banjul commemorating the coup that brought Jammeh to power. It was the rainy season, and supporters milled about with green umbrellas emblazoned with his party logo; the less fortunate stood in soaked T-shirts printed with his face. A marching band played, arms swinging in unison. A Toyota pickup truck mounted with a machine gun drove around in circles.

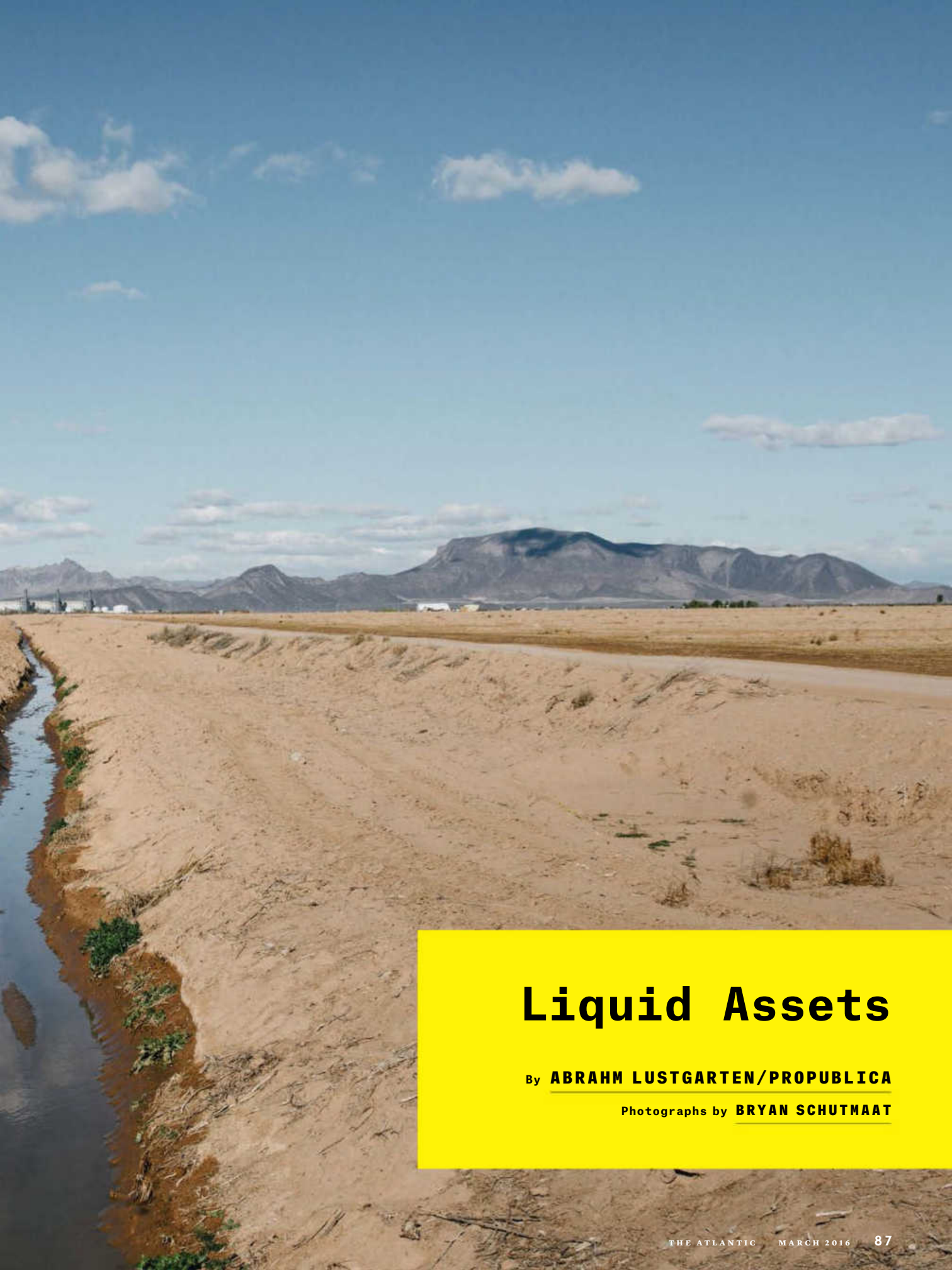
As the parade made its way down Independence Drive, I followed at a distance. Behind me, I heard a thunder of footsteps and teenage shouts: the youth wing of Jammeh's party, rushing to join the rally. They had known no other president, and their devotion appeared unconditional. One girl's shirt read WE WILL DO IT FOR JAMMEH AGAIN & AGAIN.

A number of Gambian officials appeared at the event, but noticeably absent was Jammeh himself. Since the coup attempt, he has curtailed his public appearances and made no known foreign trips. He remains in the State House. **A**

Stuart A. Reid is an editor at Foreign Affairs. Reporting for this article was funded by a travel grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

A maverick investor is buying up water rights in the West. Could his plan solve the region's water crisis?

An irrigation
ditch in Arizona's
Maricopa Valley,
about an hour
west of Phoenix



Liquid Assets

By **ABRAHM LUSTGARTEN/PROPUBICA**

Photographs by **BRYAN SCHUTMAAT**

On a brisk, cloudless day last January,

Disque Deane Jr. stepped out of his SUV, kicked his cowboy boots in the dirt, and looked around. He had driven two hours from Reno on one of the loneliest stretches of interstate in the United States to visit the Diamond S Ranch, just outside the town of Winnemucca, Nevada. Before him, open fields stretched all the way to the Santa Rosa mountains, 30 miles away. But the land was barren. The fields had been chewed down to the roots by cattle, and the ranch's equipment had been stripped for parts. A steel trestle bridge lay pitched into the Humboldt River.

Surveying the dilapidated structures and the gopher-riddled soil, Deane saw something few others might: potential. The ranch and an adjoining property, totaling about 11,400 acres—14 times the size of Central Park—were for sale for \$10.5 million, and he was thinking about buying them.

Deane is not a rancher or a farmer; he's a hedge-fund manager who had flown in from New York City the previous night. And as he appraised the property, he was less interested in its crop or cattle potential than in a different source of wealth: the water running through its streams and coursing beneath its surface. This tract would come with the rights to large amounts of water from the region's only major river, the Humboldt. Some of those rights were issued more than 150 years ago, which means they outrank almost all others in the state. Even if drought continues to force ranches and farms elsewhere in Nevada to cut back, the Diamond S will almost certainly get its fill.

Deane looks at the drought, the perennial mismanagement of water in the American West, and the region's growing population, and believes a reckoning is coming. Rising demand and shrinking supply virtually guarantee that water's value will increase. Anticipating that day, he's racing to buy up as much of it as he can.

THAT THE WEST had a limited supply of water was understood from the start. In 1869, John Wesley Powell ran a pioneering expedition down the region's largest river, the Colorado. He eventually reported back to Congress that the West was an inhospitable desert split by that great gushing river, which was so difficult to access—cut off by cliffs and canyons and mountains—that its bounty was out of reach. Growing food in much of the West would be almost impossible. "Many droughts will occur," he warned. "Many seasons in a long series will be fruitless."

But the allure of all that land was irresistible. "The western half of the United States would sustain a population greater than that of our whole country today if the waters that now run to waste were saved and used for irrigation," President Theodore Roosevelt declared in 1901. The next year, he signed the


Reclamation Act, paving the way for the creation of the federal bureau charged with reshaping the western landscape.

Within a year, four federal dams and a major river-diversion project had been planned. In the ensuing decades, concrete barriers were erected across rivers from Montana to Mexico, magnificent canyons were flooded, and tunnels and canals were built to reroute water under the Continental Divide and across the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts. By the 1980s, the Colorado River had been turned into one of the world's largest plumbing systems—a web of infrastructure designed to distribute the region's water as widely as possible and encourage settlers to move west and take advantage of it.

It worked. Since 1960, tens of millions of people have migrated toward the Pacific, settling in Las Vegas and Tempe and Boulder. Denver has tripled in size. Phoenix, having added some 3.6 million people, has more than quintupled. Today, one in eight Americans depends on water from the Colorado River system, and about 15 percent of the nation's crops are grown with it.

But the demands on the river were never sustainable. In 1922, the seven states in the Colorado River watershed signed a compact dividing its water. With little historical data, they calculated the river's capacity after a decade of unusually wet conditions. In an average year, the river flows with less water than the states and Mexico—which was later promised





Disque Deane Jr. got into the water business in the 1990s. He believed water was an ideal investment: a resource everyone needed but almost no one valued.

its own share—count on taking out of it. Since the current drought began, in 2000, that shortfall has averaged 25 percent. Instead of adjusting their allotments, states have drawn down the nation's largest reservoirs, which are quickly draining. Even this winter's El Niño weather pattern won't

bring enough rain to restore the region's supply, and federal officials are bracing for the possibility that Lake Mead, the largest reservoir in the U.S., could reach a record low as early as next year, which would trigger emergency rationing.

To determine who gets water and who doesn't, states rely on a system that originated more than 150 years ago—when water was plentiful and people were scarce. During the Gold Rush, prospectors staked claims along western streams, only to find themselves robbed of the water they needed in order to mine as competitors upriver laid new claims and diverted the stream's flow. The courts, hearing the miners' grievances, settled on a system called "prior appropriation," which promised rights to use a share of water based on who got there first.

Prior appropriation became the foundation of western water law, and it established order in the West. Today, though, state water laws are largely to blame for the crippling shortages. Because water rights were divvied up at a time when few cities existed west of the Mississippi, some 80 percent of the region's water goes to farmers, leaving insufficient supplies for growing cities and industries. And farmers must put all their water to "beneficial use" or risk losing their allotment—a rule that was originally intended to prevent hoarding but that today can encourage waste. Many farmers have not adopted modern technology that can cut water use by up to 50 percent, in part because they need to protect their water rights.

Farmers might prefer to sell their extra water rather than letting it soak into the ground, but there, too, the laws get in the way. Not only is it difficult to prove that water sales satisfy standards for beneficial use, but they are generally forbidden across state lines. Where intrastate trades are allowed, they are conditioned on not causing harm to other rights holders in the surrounding area. That's a laudable intention, but it forces farmers who want to sell their water to spend thousands of dollars on engineers and lawyers.

The West's cities, meanwhile, are forecast to add at least another 10 million residents over the next three decades. Where the water to serve those people will come from is anyone's guess. City and state leaders have seriously discussed building a pipeline from the Missouri River, seeding clouds with silver iodide to create rain, and towing icebergs from the Arctic. Their most pragmatic hopes lie in desalinating ocean water, an expensive and energy-intensive process.

Something has got to give.

In theory, states could step in and reallocate water according to modern economic priorities. After all, the West's millions of acres of farmland account for less than 2 percent of the region's economic output, and moving just 10 percent of the water off farms would likely resolve current shortfalls. Few things are more controversial in the West, though, than even minor meddling with water laws. Canceling or redistributing rights that are more than a century old would be political suicide in a part of the country where personal property is sacrosanct and farmers wield a lot of influence. As water shortages

have slowly worsened over the past two decades, politicians have done little to avert the crisis.

Where government has failed, Deane believes capitalism offers an elegant solution. Allowing people to buy and sell water rights is a more expedient way to redistribute the West's water, he argues. Waste would be discouraged, water would shift to where it's needed most, and farmers would be compensated. He's convinced that this is our best hope for ending the West's water shortage—and that it could make him and his investors very, very rich.

WHEN DISQUE DEANE JR. first said he wanted to get into the water business, his father was skeptical. Disque Sr. was a legendary New York real-estate investor who financed Brooklyn's Starrett City. He raised Disque Jr. with the boy's mother—a fashion consultant and the second of his three wives—in an Upper East Side townhouse and sent him to the tony Trinity prep school and then to Duke University. (He would later pledge \$20 million to fund an institute at Duke to study the future of the human race.) A famous hard-ass, he had no patience for stupidity or mistakes.

Disque Jr. saw himself working in foreign affairs. While still at Duke, he applied on a whim to join the CIA but was roundly rejected. "The minute I walked into the interview room he said, 'You don't have a chance,'" Deane told me. "'We need people who blend into the wall. We don't need people who stand out.'" Rather than become a spy, he got an internship analyzing arms control at a London-based think tank. About a year later, looking to make more money, he decided to go to business school. After graduating, he took a job as a trader at Lazard, the global investment bank where his father had been a senior partner. In 1991, he tried to start an online real-estate company, an idea before its time.

Two years later, Deane found what would become his life's work when he read an article in *Forbes* about an investor who specialized in water. He ran models calculating the past performance of companies whose business was tied to water—pipe manufacturers, treatment facilities, utilities—and found that they beat regular Wall Street indices. He read every book he could get his hands on about hydrology and geography and western politics, and grew in his conviction that he'd tripped onto a prime investment strategy. "For me, this was perfect information," he told me, "raw knowledge" no one else seemed to have.

"There were very few people who thought I was rational," Deane said. He had an enviable life in Greenwich, Connecticut. When he packed up for Fort Collins, Colorado, to work with the water investor he'd read about in *Forbes*, a man named Al Parker, his mother cried and his wife, an Argentinian he'd met in Spain, returned to South America, leaving Deane to fly down for visits.

But Deane saw opportunity: a resource everyone needed but almost no one valued. His first big investment, in 1995, was an old mining tunnel in central Colorado that came with the rights to a large volume of water. Deane and Parker named their new company Vidler Water, after the tunnel, and set out to sell water to Colorado's eastern cities.

With the Vidler purchase, Deane and Parker had bought the rights to water that flowed down a creek from high in the mountains in Summit County, Colorado—water that residents

had been using for years to maintain their lawns and wash their cars. One evening, Deane and Parker held a meeting and explained that locals could continue to take their fill, for a fee. Deane says he thought he and Parker were fixing a problem by making water legally available to people who needed it. But the more Parker tried to explain, the angrier the crowd got. In the back of the room, Deane opened a window, swung his legs over the sill, and dropped into the parking lot, where he pulled Parker's Volkswagen Beetle around to scoop him up.

Parker told me Deane is honest and highly intelligent, but also intense and opinionated—not always the easiest person to work with. Deane left Vidler in 1999 and struck out on his own. In 2005, he returned to New York and teamed up with an old friend he'd met when he was in college, Matt Diserio. A former lacrosse player from Connecticut, Diserio, a self-described “information junkie,” had thought about becoming a journalist but decided to work on Wall Street instead. They called their company Water Asset Management and brought on a third partner to manage the operations, a former colleague of Diserio's named Marc Robert. The three had skied together long ago in Courchevel, France.

They pooled about \$3 million of their own money and launched a hedge fund devoted to buying and selling just about anything having to do with water. Diserio focused on investing in stocks of companies that stood to profit as water became increasingly scarce; Deane set out to get as close as possible to buying the water itself, scouring parts of the country where water rights could be traded. They shared office space in Midtown Manhattan with a group of lawyers who handled Hasidic divorces, and for two years none of them took a salary.

Today Water Asset Management runs funds worth more than \$500 million. It trades stocks of companies that manufacture pipes, pumps, and water meters. It bought and later sold a municipal water supplier, and has invested in treated wastewater. Not all of the projects it has a stake in have succeeded: A controversial plan to develop a vast aquifer in the Mojave Desert and pipe the water to cities in Southern California failed to get an important federal approval, and some shareholders have filed a lawsuit against the company behind the plan. (The company, Cadiz, has contested the suit and moved

AMERICA CONSUMES more water per capita than just about any other country—more than three times as much as China, and 12 times as much as Denmark. People in the driest states use the most: Residents of Arizona each use 147 gallons a day (not counting agricultural water or water used to generate power), compared with just 51 gallons in Wisconsin, largely by filling swimming pools and watering lawns year-round in the desert. This extravagant use continues despite scarcity because water is kept artificially cheap. The water bills that Americans pay cover a mere sliver of the cost of the infrastructure that delivers water to them. Some city users pay \$1 for 1,000 gallons. On farms, water is even cheaper. One thousand gallons of agricultural water in western states can cost as little as a few pennies.

The West would have plenty of water if people used it more wisely: Most of the region's supply goes to growing low-value, water-intensive crops such as hay and alfalfa—in many cases in the desert. “It seems crazy,” Douglas Kenney, the director of the Western Water Policy Program at the University of Colorado Law School, told me. “But there is just no tradition of thinking about what is and is not an appropriate use of water based on economic criteria.”

Water markets promise to correct this: When you allow water to be bought and sold more freely, its value begins to match its importance, waste becomes expensive, and the West's water problems begin to solve themselves.

Water has been bought and sold in parts of the United States for decades. But arcane aspects of state laws have kept trading from becoming routine enough to make much difference in the overall supply. If Deane gets his way, barriers to trading will be removed and a market will form that can shift water to meet changing needs almost as quickly as the stock exchange moves shares.

Australia has already instituted a water market similar to what Deane has in mind. By mid-2006, Southern Australia's Murray-Darling River Basin had seen a decade of drought. Then, unexpectedly, the flows of the Murray dropped farther, falling to 40 percent below the previous record low. As in the U.S., water trading had for decades been limited and cumbersome. But as the drought worsened, the government backed a cap-and-trade system. “We have a very simple rule, which is that if somebody wants more water, you have to figure out who gets less,” Mike Young, a professor of water and environmental policy at the University of Adelaide

If Americans gave up meat one day a week, they would save an amount of water equivalent to the entire flow of the Colorado River each year.

for its dismissal.) But Deane and Diserio told me their two long-standing funds have shown annualized returns of 6.5 percent and 9.6 percent over the past decade, and California's drought has brought new investors through their doors—including not just wealthy individuals with a tolerance for risk, but pension-fund managers as well. To Deane, the growing interest is a sign that the rest of the world is finally coming to see what he did long ago. “Maybe,” Deane told me, “I have the ability to look around corners a little bit.”





After most of the water rights in Crowley County were sold, the area's economy collapsed.

and an expert in water trading, told me. As trading became more common, the market began to arbitrate that decision.

As a result, people have found ways to reduce waste. Farmers in an irrigation district that had porous dirt ditches, for instance, began to line them with concrete, saving millions of dollars' worth of water that would have otherwise seeped into the earth. The farmers started asking: "If we spend \$3 million here and get water we can sell for \$5 million elsewhere, is that a good deal?" Young said. "And the answer is yes."

In dry years, the price of water on Australia's market rose, but so did the number of trades, showing that people used the market to move water to where it was needed—and valued—most. Water-intensive crops such as cotton and rice were temporarily phased out as the water needed to grow them became more valuable than the crops themselves.

In the western U.S., a consensus has begun to emerge that following Australia's example is a good idea. In 2012, the Western Governors' Association issued a report supporting states' efforts to promote new ways of transferring water. Cities, too, are putting their weight behind trading. Even the nonprofit Environmental Defense Fund cautiously supports the idea:

The organization joined other groups in purchasing Colorado River water in 2014 for the sole purpose of letting it flow. The river reached Mexico's Sea of Cortez for the first time in 16 years.

But one problem with developing a market for trading water is that many farmers—the people who control most of the water—are against the idea.

TO UNDERSTAND FARMERS' OPPOSITION, one has only to look at the example of Crowley County, in southeastern Colorado, once one of the nation's most fertile agricultural areas. A cannery preserved tomatoes before shipping them on the Missouri Pacific Railroad to markets across the country. Sugar City, a town of 1,500 people so manicured that everyone's lawns had to be trimmed in the same direction, was home to National Sugar, which employed hundreds of people. Ordway, the county seat, had two car dealerships, three grocery stores, a bustling JCPenney department store, and a movie theater that played family films on Sunday nights.

Crowley County relied on water diverted from a tributary of the Colorado River near Aspen, 200 miles away, in order to supplement the Arkansas River. Farmers owned shares in ditch systems and reservoirs that distributed the water, and some 60,000 acres of farmland were cultivated with it. But in

the 1960s, the growing cities of Pueblo, Colorado Springs, and Aurora purchased a large portion of water rights from Crowley farmers, and all of that began to slowly slip away. When Foxley Cattle, which had enormous land holdings, made a deal to sell its water rights to Colorado Springs in 1976, the area's decline went into high gear. The sale had two immediate effects: It dried up thousands of acres of pasture by permanently diverting a huge portion of the region's water, and it opened farmers' eyes to the incredible cash value of the water they had left.

For a while, farmers pledged to keep their water in the county. But in the late 1980s, the city of Aurora made an irresistible offer: It would pay about \$1,000 for each share of a ditch system, and the water that came with it—quadruple the price of some of the earliest deals. Farmers in Crowley, like those in so many agricultural communities across rural America, had long been struggling against low crop prices, an exodus of youth, and an aging population. The money offered an exit. "It was a way for them to get out, pay their debt off, and have a way to retire," says Darla Wyeno, who runs the Crowley County Heritage Center out of a stately brick building that was once her schoolhouse. Her husband learned to drive the tractor on his family's farm when he was 9 years old. "After we sold the water," Wyeno says, "we played a lot of golf, did a lot of traveling."

The offer was like a breach in a dam. Aurora also bought up almost all the water in another ditch system near the town of Rocky Ford, just across the county line. Pueblo West, 60 miles away, bought water to serve houses on just-constructed cul-de-sacs stretching all the way into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. As more houses were built, the value of the remaining water in Crowley climbed even higher, reaching \$10,000 a share.

Orville Tomky, a 10th Mountain Division soldier who had farmed in the area since shortly after World War II, tried to resist as the pressure mounted. "My wife every night at supper would say, 'When are we going to sell the rest of that Twin Lakes water so we can have a lot more money?'" he told me. One night he divided up the water rights, giving 20 shares to each of his four children, five shares to each of his five grandchildren, and 30 shares to his wife. Selling the shares put some of the kids through graduate school, gave them down payments for their own homes, and paid for a family ski lodge in the mountains.

Eventually, though, Crowley County passed a point of no return. With so much water gone, the empty irrigation ditches didn't work; one lonely farmer at the end of the run would see all his water soaked up by the soil long before it ever reached his farm. And with fewer and fewer farmers around to share the expense of maintaining the ditch systems, the cost kept rising. Farmers had little choice but to sell, and all but 11 in the county did. The place literally dried up.

Kneeling in his driveway changing a truck tire last summer, Tomky's son-in-law Matt Heimerich recalled what the town



Haboobs—huge black clouds of sand—blow in, piling tumbleweeds against buildings and making it difficult to see across the street.

had lost. Though tens of millions of dollars in water rights were sold, few of the proceeds were reinvested in the community, he said. One by one, families moved away. The tomato and sugar factories shut down, and without goods to ship, the railroad stopped sending trains through town. Ordway's car dealerships closed, and the tractor store went bankrupt. As though someone had pulled a bottom block out from a Jenga tower, Crowley County fell into an inexorable collapse.

Garrett Gibson (left) is one of the few remaining ranchers in Crowley County. Below: abandoned silos near the old railroad tracks.



"I couldn't have eaten enough Prozac," Heimerich said.

One could view Crowley's loss as an inevitable part of the larger downturn in American farming—and a justifiable reallocation of resources. Crowley County was itself diverting water from the Colorado River system, after all, under a legal system that encouraged waste. But the people still living in Crowley point to the green fields in adjacent counties, and say the water sales killed their towns. Of the 60,000 acres once farmed there, about 4,000 produce crops today. Ordway's Main Street is a procession of boarded-up buildings.

The dead land has led to a sort of environmental catastrophe. The wildlife is all but gone. Few birds chirp. With nothing to pollinate, bees have abandoned their colonies. Crowley was once a paradise for hunters, Tobe Allumbaugh, a county commissioner, told me. Today "you could wear out a pickup truck and never see a pheasant." Decades of farming have left the soil brittle and sapped of its natural nutrients; now that it's been abandoned, the land won't simply heal and return to its natural prairie state. In every direction, empty fields and pastures extend for miles.

The wind in this part of Colorado can be merciless, and when it rakes across unfarmed fields, it scours loose soil and moves it. Another Crowley commissioner, Frank Grant, told me about the haboobs, huge black clouds of sand, that blow in, piling tumbleweeds against buildings and making it difficult to see across the street. The dirt piles up in drifts, blocking roads, filling gutters, and burying windshields. "We've essentially just turned into a desert," Grant said.

CROWLEY COUNTY MAY be a worst-case scenario, but it is hardly unique. Even in neighboring counties, new water deals are being proposed all the time. To be sure, some of these sales have given farmers new income that helped keep them afloat—or allowed others who wanted to leave farming to cash out. But Crowley reveals a broader risk. Could water sales that today appear logical and efficient one day come to seem shortsighted?

Western states have already retired hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland as cities have built on them or taken their water. Once water is moved off a farm, that land is unlikely to ever produce crops again. Water rights are difficult to buy back—Crowley's farmers told me they can't afford to do so—and in many places the land is developed, filled with houses and parking lots and strip malls. "We are actually dismantling our agriculture and the food infrastructure," says Pat O'Toole, the president of the Family Farm Alliance, a grass-roots organization that advocates for western agricultural interests.

The United States can probably afford to lose some of its

farmland. But if left unchecked, these deals could begin to threaten the food supply. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization projects that food production globally will have to increase by 70 percent by 2050 to support an expanding and increasingly affluent population, and it warns that urban expansion into rural land is putting food production at risk.

And, of course, growing more food requires more water. In theory, Americans could simply eat less meat: A vast majority of the West's water is used to produce feed for cattle, and data from Water Footprint Network, a Dutch NGO, show that if Americans gave up meat one day a week, they would save an amount of water equivalent to the entire flow of the Colorado River each year. But that cultural shift might prove even more difficult than reallocating water rights.

Some opponents of water markets worry that when water is sold to the highest bidder, the poor could be priced out of an essential resource. "It's a slippery slope," says Mitch Jones, a senior policy advocate at Food and Water Watch, which has studied the effects of water privatization and commercialization. "You are setting up a system where ability to pay—wealth—is the determining factor in your ability to access water." Jones points to places like Bolivia, where privatization has left some of the poorest people without access to water.

Disque Deane thinks such concerns are overblown. He supports the idea of setting aside what policy makers call "lifeline supplies" to guarantee households some minimal amount of water. But he says if markets jack up prices on higher levels of consumption, that may not be a bad thing. Anyone who wants to fill a swimming pool, water a golf course, or use billions of gallons of Colorado River water to grow cotton in the Sonoran Desert, he says, should have to pay for that privilege.

LAST WINTER IN WINNEMUCCA, Deane parked outside a historic tavern called the Martin Hotel. He walked through its wood-paneled bar, beneath the attic speakeasy that kept the town lush through Prohibition, and into a private dining room in the back, where a local water official from the state engineer's office was waiting.

Deane peppered the engineer with questions. Who are the big water users? Could the water from the Diamond S Ranch be used on the adjacent property he was also looking to buy? How about up the road on another farm he owns? "There is some latitude there," the engineer told him.

Deane already knew the answers to many of these questions; his lawyers and staff had done their due diligence. He was more interested in how his questions were addressed, in feeling out someone who had the authority to stand in the way of his plans.

Water Asset Management's strategy is to find ways to use its land to generate revenue—or at least cover costs—while maintaining its core investment in the water itself. At the Diamond S, Deane talked about building a data center, because fiber-optic cables run along the railway near the property, or a small-scale power station that would take advantage of a natural-gas pipeline nearby. "If KB Home wanted to come in," Deane told me, referring to one of the largest home builders in the U.S., "we'd talk about it."

With the firm's latest purchases, Deane is building out a new fund, and his aim is to secure investors annualized returns of about 20 percent over 10 years. That leaves little

time for government policies to change and water markets to mature. He's looking for places where the laws already allow trading and other investors have yet to notice. The ideal opportunity, Deane said, involves high-priority water rights on a run-down farm with major cities in every direction. The ranch near Winnemucca looked like a match, but Deane later told me that he'd decided to pass because he had questions about whether the groundwater might be contaminated. (The Nevada Division of Environmental Protection has since confirmed that pollutants were found at the site.)

Ideal opportunities can be tough to find. "Debt, death, and divorce" has become a sort of motto, Deane said, because those circumstances drive people to sell. Not that he's out to swindle anyone. "There are no stupid sellers," he told me. "Rural communities are much smarter than most of the people that walk into them. They know what they need and they know who people are. It's one of the reasons our card says 'Water Asset Management,' not 'Sam's Farm Co-Op,' because you can't pull the wool over people's eyes."

Deane told me he'd abandoned an effort to buy a distressed New Mexico property in 2014 after hearing about a local gas-station attendant who—opposed to the idea of investors buying up water—refused to fill the cars of workers who were drilling wells on the property. He said he wants to work with communities, to facilitate mutually beneficial solutions, as someone who has the network, capital, and know-how to make a deal. He pointed to Water Asset Management's investment in Prescott Valley, Arizona: The town wanted to upgrade its water-treatment plant and was looking for capital. Deane and his partners bought the rights to the cleaned-up water. The town got the money it needed for the upgrade, and Water Asset Management got water it could sell to local developers for a profit. "We go where we can be helpful," he said. "That's all I've said, since day one."

Deane likes to see himself as a friend of farmers, someone who can get them the compensation they deserve for 100 years of homesteading. He said he shares their values. But when I described to him the water sales in Crowley County, he had trouble explaining exactly how some of his deals have differed—except to say that the farmers he worked with went into those transactions with their eyes wide open. Either way, there's no denying that farms—and by extension farmers—are the target of his investments. Without them, water markets couldn't exist.

One evening at a cocktail reception in Las Vegas, Deane told a conservationist how to deal with farmers who might say no to fallowing their fields. How about for \$100 an acre-foot? he would press, referring to a common measurement of water. "Maybe." Two thousand dollars an acre-foot? "Sure." "How do you get a farmer's attention?" he said. "Humbly, and with a thick wad of money."

THE IDEA OF letting money alone steer decisions about water use can make even the most open-minded public officials uneasy. At a drought forum held by the Western Governors' Association in late 2014, where Deane took part in a panel discussion, officials voiced a barrage of concerns: How would states maintain their authority over water if people sold it across state lines? How could markets balance the decisions

of individual farmers with the collective impact on the broader community? Was water the property of rights holders to sell in the first place—or were water rights simply a license to use a resource that ultimately belongs to the public?

Deane emphasized the need for reform. The status quo has failed, he told the audience. "What should we be doing to solve this problem? Because the alternative is unbearable, right?"

The discussion then turned to a potential compromise: Perhaps the risks could be mitigated, someone suggested, by structuring temporary deals that allowed farmers to retain ultimate control of the water.

Thirteen years ago, farmers in California's Palo Verde Valley—one of the state's oldest farming areas—entered into an agreement with the Metropolitan Water District, the agency that serves Los Angeles, San Diego, and much of the rest of urban Southern California, to essentially lease a portion


"Debt, death, and divorce" has become a sort of motto, Deane said, because those circumstances drive people to sell.

of their water. The model seeks to protect farmers even from their own financial temptation. In addition to an up-front payment of \$3,160 an acre, the agency pays them \$800 an acre for fallowing portions of their farms each year. It has also invested \$6 million in the community, to counter whatever economic harm might come from the fields' temporarily drying up.

The arrangement is anything but a free market: To ensure that most of the water stays in the valley, the agreement limits the amount of land any one farmer can fallow in a year to 35 percent of his or her holdings. Still, farmers get added income without losing their rights to the water, and the Metropolitan Water District says Los Angeles and its other cities get reliable access to water, which helps them make it through drought years.

Deane told me that if the political consensus leads to leasing water, it's a solution he can get behind. His hope, after all, is that more-frequent trades, for lower transaction costs and smaller margins, will one day replace the blockbuster deals his company relies on today. Leasing is a perfectly good way to achieve that aim.

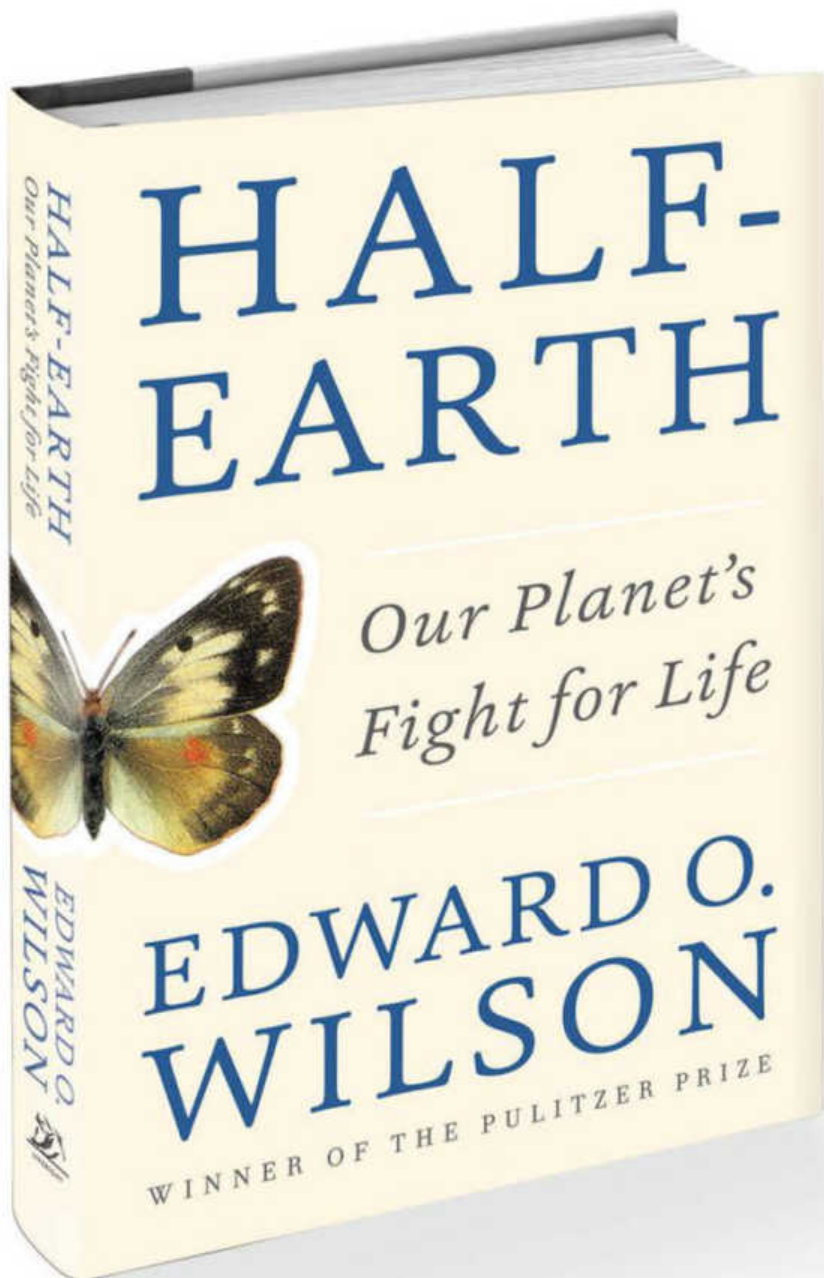
Farmers near Crowley County recently visited the Palo Verde Valley and are setting up a pilot program to test out that model. "To me it was an answer to a prayer," John Schweizer, one of the leaders of the project, told me. He described it as "the only thing I found where you can keep your water, keep your farming, and still get the cities their water if they need it."

But there was resignation in his enthusiasm, a tacit acknowledgment that much of what Deane and others have to say is correct: There is enough water in farming to move some of it without leaving the country to starve, and like it or not, the transfer of agricultural water to cities is going to happen. They can sell it, lease it—or have it taken from them. 

Abraham Lustgarten is a senior reporter with ProPublica, where he writes about energy, water, and climate change.

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Where Have You Gone, Annie Dillard?

Why America's latter-day Thoreau, who has been silent for nearly a decade, may have run out of words in her quest to renovate the soul

By WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

Illustration by Emmanuel Polanco

THE ABUNDANCE, a selection from the work of one of the great, original voices in recent American letters, might just as easily be called *The Absence*. It speaks of absence—for nature's profusion, in Annie Dillard, is everywhere the sign-age of the hidden god she seeks—and

it also marks an absence: hers. Dillard's first book appeared in 1974. Over the following 25 years, she published 10 more original volumes, including two that have achieved the status of modern classics, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a latter-day *Walden*, and *The Writing Life*, a "spiritual Strunk & White" (as one reviewer put it), and two more that deserve to, *Holy the Firm*, which might have been written in letters of flame, and



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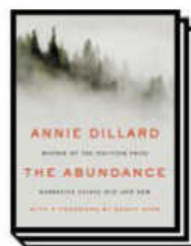
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Teaching a Stone to Talk, a jewel box of narrative meditations. (Some might add *An American Childhood*, her celebrated memoir.) In the 17 years since, she's published one, and none since 2007.

The Abundance only serves to underscore the dearth. The subtitle, *Narrative Essays Old and New*, is false advertising; there are no new pieces here. The most recent essay in the book, which is also the only one not included in a previous volume, is 11 years old. There are many reasons a writer might slow down or even stop, most of them mysterious to strangers. But Dillard's turn to silence, if that is what it is, could in retrospect be seen as having been inevitable all along—given her choice of materials, her idiosyncratic sensibility, the very nature of her project.

Dillard declared her arrival, at the age of 28—brash and bold and talented beyond belief—with *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). The book was unabashed about its lineage. An ardent young American takes to the woods, anchoring herself beside a water. Sojourning for many a season, she distills her experience down to a symbolic single year. "I propose to keep



THE ABUNDANCE: NARRATIVE ESSAYS OLD AND NEW
ANNIE DILLARD
Ecco/HarperCollins

Dillard scrutinizes nature with monastic patience and a microscopic eye.

here," she announces at the start of her account, "what Thoreau called 'a meteorological journal of the mind.'" She scrutinizes nature with monastic patience and a microscopic eye. She delivers doctrine with the certainty of revelation and the arrogance (and agedness) of youth. She summons us to wake from dull routine. With flourishes of brass, she proclaims a new dawn.

The text itself is thickly planted with marvels to watch for, its vision fresh as Adam's on the first day. A creek bank is a "twiggy haze." A gibbous moon is "softly frayed, like the heel of a sock." "It snowed all yesterday and never emptied the sky," Dillard tells us. "Any object at a distance—like the dead, ivy-covered

walnut I see from the bay window—looked like a black-and-white frontispiece seen through the sheet of white tissue." But she doesn't need a simile to send a sense aloft. Muskrats in their dens "strew the floor with plant husks and seeds, rut in repeated bursts, and sleep humped and soaking, huddled in balls." The language makes of brute factuality a verbal music. An egg case of a praying mantis "has a dead straw, dead weed color, and a curious brittle texture, hard as varnish, but pitted minutely, like frozen foam."

There are flashes of humor as well. Newts "are altogether excellent creatures, if somewhat moist, but no one pays the least attention to them, except children." Children, of course, and her.

Yet for all Dillard's brilliance as a nature writer, nature isn't finally her subject. She situates herself on territory like Thoreau's but faces toward a very different compass point. He also went to nature, truth be told, with other things in mind. He looked at the pond, but he was thinking about Concord—how the people there lived, and how it might be possible to live another way. *Walden's* first, long chapter is titled "Economy," complete with lists of expenditures for things like nails and lard. We watch him build his famous little house, and plant his beans, and chop his wood, which warms him twice.

But in *Pilgrim* there is no economy and no society. We don't know how Dillard lives, or how she makes a living, or much of anything about her circumstances. Notwithstanding the occasional, distant presence of neighbors in the book, it comes as a surprise to find her describing the creek's vicinity, in a subsequent volume, as suburban—and a shock to learn, from biographical sources, that she was married the whole time. In a curious way, she is absent from her own book, at least as more than an Emersonian eyeball (albeit one that's cabled to a buzzing brain), and others are absent altogether. The cabin near Concord had plenty of visitors—in fact, there's a whole chapter in *Walden* called "Visitors"—among whom was Thoreau's dear friend Ellery Channing. Dillard has a companion

named Ellery Channing too, but he's a goldfish. Thoreau, whose commandment is "simplify," wants to reconstruct society from the ground up. Dillard, whose law is "look," only wants to renovate your soul.

She looks at crayfish, looks at copperheads, looks at a little green frog, half out of the water, that as she watches "crumpled and began to sag ... shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football," its innards liquefied and emptied by a giant biting bug. But looking at these marvels, she is always looking for God. She is not a naturalist, not an environmentalist; she's a theologian—a pilgrim. Her field notes on the physical world are recorded as researches toward the fundamental metaphysical conundra: Why is there something rather than nothing, and what on Earth are we doing here? What, in other words—with crayfish and copperheads and giant biting bugs, with creeks and stars and human beings with their sense of beauty—does God have in mind?

DILLARD, NEEDLESS TO say, does not answer these questions. But the striking thing about her search for God is that she sometimes finds him. *Pilgrim's* second chapter, after a kind of introduction, is titled "Seeing." (Both sections are included in *The Abundance*.) There are two kinds, she explains. The common variety is active, where you strain, against the running babble of internal monologue, to pay attention to what's actually in front of you. That's the sort of seeing that produces perceptions, and phrases, like *twiggy haze*. But, she tells us, "there is another kind of seeing that involves a letting go." You do not seek, you wait. It isn't prayer; it is grace. The visions come to you, and they come from out of the blue.

The distinction is akin to Proust's two forms of memory. His holy grail, you might recall, is the involuntary kind, the kind that bursts upon you unexpectedly, as when the narrator's entire childhood unfurls from the madeleine. That is the epiphany; that is the miracle. So it is with Dillard. She tells us about a girl who was cured of congenital blindness and, being taken into a garden, saw, as she put it, "the tree with the lights in it." It was for that tree, Dillard says, that she herself searched for years:



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Then one day, walking along Tinker Creek, thinking of nothing at all, I saw it—the tree with the lights in it. It was the same backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost, only charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame ... It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance ... I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck.

The encounter is erotic (“knocked breathless by a powerful glance”), like the ecstasies of Saint Teresa. God has seen and seized her, claimed her. This, again, is something very different from Thoreau’s experience. To use a pair of terms that Dillard introduces in a later book, she is not a pantheist (as he was) but a panentheist. God, panentheism says, is not coextensive with, identical to, the physical world, the world of nature. He is a being that transcends it even as he dwells within it. Get rid of nature, for the pantheist, and you get rid of God. Get rid of nature, for the panentheist, and you see him all

the clearer. That, I think, is why it has to be a creek for Dillard, not a pond. Walden, in its depth and stillness (the attributes Thoreau insists upon most keenly), symbolizes nature’s stability and serenity. The world abides and always will. But the creek, for Dillard, is energy, divine spirit, “the stream of light pouring down.” The world does not abide. Creation is continuous, and the heavens will be rolled up as a scroll. She watches the water, but waits for the flame.

The striking thing about Dillard’s search for God is that she sometimes finds him.

Thoreau runs his narrative year from spring to spring—nature filling up, emptying, and starting to fill up again. Dillard runs her own from winter to winter; the emphasis is on the emptiness. In an afterword written for the 25th-anniversary edition, she reveals a deeper, two-part structure. “Neoplatonic Christianity described two

routes to God: the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*. Philosophers on the *via positiva* assert that God ... possesses all positive attributes.” Those along the other pathway “stressed God’s unknowability.” They “jettisoned everything that was not God; they hoped that what was left would be only the divine dark.” *Pilgrim*, Dillard says, walks both routes in succession. The first half, culminating with the summer solstice, is the plenitude; the second the reduction. A final chapter recapitulates the movement. Its epigraph—employed again in *The Abundance*—comes from the Koran. “They will question thee concerning what they should expend. Say: ‘The Abundance.’” Accumulate, then spend. Accumulate to spend. Gather nature to get rid of it—but you can’t get rid of it until you’ve done the formic labor that such gathering entails.

GET RID OF NATURE, to see the God who dwells in nature. It sounds paradoxical, and it is. (Dillard quotes Augustine in a later book: “If you do understand, then

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it is not God.”) But Dillard has been chasing that paradox ever since. The *via negativa*, with its purity and stringency, clearly proved to be the more congenial path. Virginia, where she’d come for college, did not turn out to be her landscape. From Tinker Creek, beneath the Blue Ridge Mountains in the lushness of the Roanoke Valley, she decamped, the year after publishing *Pilgrim*, for a place considerably more austere: Lummi Island, in the northern reaches of Puget Sound. The region, with its wall of mountains to the east and endless salted ocean to the west, was for her, as she was soon to call it, “the edge of the known and comprehended world ... the western rim of the real ... the fringe edge ... where time and eternity spatter each other with foam”—a place, in other words, where nature stops and the darkness of divinity begins.

The description comes from *Holy the Firm* (1977), the work she proceeded to write there, a book that is to *Pilgrim* what Lummi Island is to Tinker Creek. It throws out the crayfish and copperheads, the frogs, the bugs, the twigs, the scientific lore, all meanderings of thought and ambulation. The text runs 65 pages, short ones, and the prose seems pressed out drop by drop. Dillard later said the book took 14 months to write, full-time, which works out to something like 25 words a day. The sentences are bitten rock, bitter water, biting wind: “Nothing is going to happen in this book. There is only a little violence here and there in the language, at the corner where eternity clips time.”

The final phrase articulates the volume’s central theme. For *eternity*, read “God.” For *time*, read “the world” (i.e., us). For *clips*, read “kills”—or maims, burns, starves, causes anguish or grief—that “little violence here and there.” Dillard later explained, in *An American Childhood* (1987), that she had quit her church, at age 16, over the problem of suffering, the evident impossibility of reconciling the idea of a loving God with the circumstances that prevail in his creation, the law of universal pain. This is the problem of Job, and like whoever wrote his story, Dillard doesn’t try to offer a solution. She knows that all you can really do is frame the question, which she does by telling us about a child

named Julie Norwich. Julie is a local girl, 7 years old. *Holy the Firm* presents itself as the record of three days on the island. On the second, Julie goes down in a plane crash—her father, flying the craft, is unharmed—and has her face burnt off.

I doubt that Julie Norwich ever existed. Her name is an echo of Julian of Norwich, the medieval anchoress and mystic, whom Dillard had alluded to in *Pilgrim*. Julie’s parents are Jesse and Ann, the father of King David (a figure for Christ in Christian typology) and the mother of the Virgin Mary. Dillard also gives us dates for the book’s events (for example, Friday, November 20) that seem deliberately to misalign with the two years during which the narrative might have taken place. But it doesn’t matter whether Julie is real. Her story is a parable, like Job’s. Her story is a riddle, like his. Why do such things happen? For they happen all the time and everywhere around us. In “The Deer at Providencia,” an essay published just around the time she moved to Puget Sound (also reproduced in *The Abundance*), Dillard writes about a trip to South America. One day she sees a deer tied up in a village. It’s going to be dinner that night. In language flayed to rawness she describes its suffering:

Trying to get itself free of the rope, the deer had cut its own neck with its hooves ... Now three of its feet were hooked in the rope under its jaw. It could not stand ... so it could not move to slacken the rope and ease the pull on its throat ... Its hip jerked; its spine shook. Its eyes rolled; its tongue, thick with spit, pushed in and out.

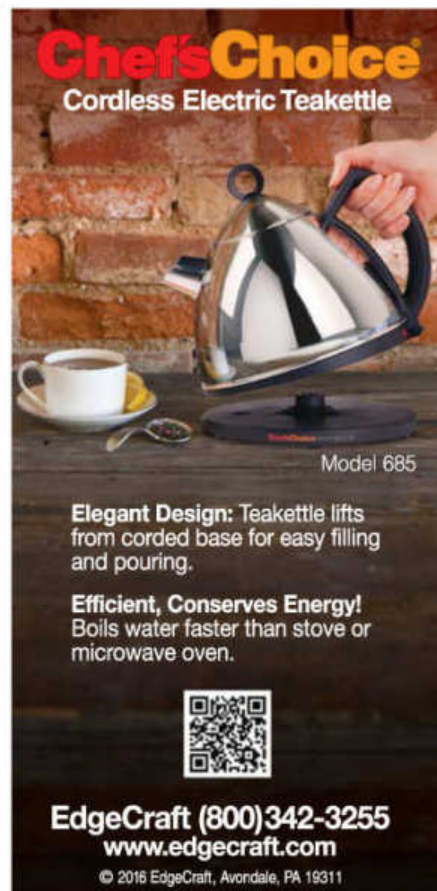
She might be a god on Olympus, looking down impassively on human suffering. (She’s also testing us to see how we react.) Afterward she eats a lavish lunch, including a venison stew. Her companions, older men, are surprised at her detachment. “Gentlemen of the city,” she apostrophizes them in the essay, “what surprises you? That there is suffering here, or that I know it?” She has thought about the fact that she (and we, and many, many other animals) eat meat. “These things are not issues,” she tells us. “They are mysteries.”

Issues are addressed; mysteries are witnessed. The story of Julie Norwich,



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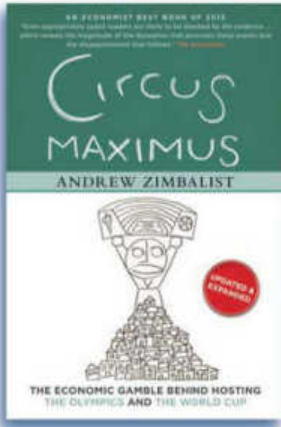
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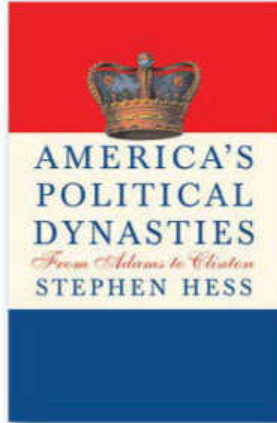
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in the second part of *Holy the Firm*, is prefigured by another story in the first. (The most celebrated passage in the book, the earlier story is also in the new collection.) Dillard is camping. A moth gets stuck in her candle flame. It burns—then, a hollowed shell, a wick, it keeps on burning. “The moth’s head was fire. She burned for two hours ... like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God, while I read by her light, kindled, while Rimbaud in Paris burnt out his brains in a thousand poems.” The final reference blossoms in the volume’s final third. The virgin Julie, consecrated

She might be a god on Olympus, looking down impassively on human suffering.

by the touch of God, will nonetheless undoubtedly go back into the world, Dillard thinks. So she herself will be the nun, the anchoress, instead. Which means the poet, the artist: head afire, channeling the Holy Spirit, “lighting the kingdom of God for the people to see.” Giving her life to illuminate the divine darkness. Bearing witness to the dear.

SUCH IS THE VOCATION Dillard expands on in *The Writing Life* (1989). The book is not a manual of tips. It is a portrait of the artist as a soul, its moral qualities and moral situation, offered in the second person. “You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment.” And: “Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time.” The book proceeds, like all her finest work, as a series of extended metaphors. The writer is a miner with a pick; the writer is a pilot with a plane; the writer is a rower in a skiff, towing a log against the current, heading stoutly always in the same direction. The volume’s dominant motif is the single room: a shed on Cape Cod, a cabin on a Puget beach, an office, a study, a carrel (a cockpit, a skiff)—the hermit’s cell, the mind alone with itself. “One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark.”

The work is a collage, like all her finest books. Dillard has remarked that her objective as a writer of prose has

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been to reproduce, on a larger scale, poetry's “capacity for deep internal structures of meaning.” (Her first book, in 1974, was a volume of lyrics, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*. Later, in 1995, she published *Mornings Like This*, whose poems are assemblages of sentences from other people's books, one book per poem.) She creates these structures like an artisan working in stained glass. A piece of this, a piece of that, a moment, a story, a scientific fact, a bit of spiritual wisdom: underneath, an iron structure; on the surface, what appears to be a mind at dazzling play. *Pilgrim* was assembled from a heap of index cards. “‘Seeing,’” that second chapter, “gave me so much trouble to put together I nearly abandoned the book.” *For the Time Being* (1999), her most recent work but one, consists of seven sections, each one cycling through a set of rubrics in fixed order (“birth,” “sand,” “China,” “clouds”), 10 of them, a kind of rosary, their facets winking as they're turned and turned about. The meanings happen in the parts, and in the spaces in between them.

In *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982), the pieces are essays themselves. The collection, which includes “The Deer at Providencia,” might just be her greatest book, and it receives the largest share of *The Abundance*. Its finest piece, its central piece, the one that's chosen to conclude the new collection, is “An Expedition to the Pole.” The essay is a single long extended metaphor in which the journey toward the Absolute—aka the God of silence—which she elsewhere calls “this feckless prospecting in the dark for the unseen,” the lifelong effort to know the unknowable and to say the unsayable, is likened to the polar expeditions of yore. To most of us, as Dillard knows, the effort seems completely pointless. To her it is the only thing that gives our life a point.

MAKE NO MISTAKE about her spiritual extremity. This is a woman who has seen angels (as she tells us in another essay), who has seen visions, who has seen the tree with the lights in it, which another witness called the burning bush. But miracles like that, she later came to feel, are things that happen only to the young. Her mission since may be conceived of as a quest to recapture

those glimpses by other, more deliberate means. No longer could she count on cracks appearing of a sudden in the midst of things through which the holy might pour. So she went to the edges. After Virginia, the scenes of her writing are almost uniformly places of, or next to, emptiness: Puget Sound, Cape Cod, the Alaskan Arctic, the Galápagos, the deserts of China and Israel—the wilderness, eternal haunt of seekers. Virginia itself, which she left around the time she turned 30, may be seen, in its spiritual fecundity, as a kind of figure for youth, her empty spaces as a metaphor for middle age.

The only thing that gives our life a point. Dillard, like Thoreau, is never shy about pronouncing wholesale condemnation on the way her fellows live. To her the mass of men lead lives not of quiet desperation but of superficiality, insensibility, and rank illusion. We live as if we think we're never going to die. We live as if our petty business counted. We live as if we weren't as numerous

“One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark.”

as sand, and each of us ephemeral as clouds. We live as if there hadn't been a hundred thousand generations here before us, and another hundred thousand were not still to come. Yet all around us holiness and grace, freely given every moment for the taking.

One of the most remarkable things about her work, in fact, is just how much is absent from it. No economy, no society: no current events, no public affairs, no social engagement. With few exceptions, her writing seems to take place entirely outside the history of its own time. (A contrast may be drawn with Marilynne Robinson, Dillard's nearest kin among contemporary authors, whose religious convictions are inseparable from strong political and social commitments.) “I had a head for religious ideas,” Dillard reports in *An American Childhood*, her chronicle of growing up in postwar, upper-class Pittsburgh, a book that is largely concerned with the development, in solitude, of the writer's own consciousness. “They made other ideas seem mean.”



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That feeling, it appears, has never altered. The social novel, the novel that “aims to fasten down the spirit of its time,” she tells us in *The Writing Life*, “has never seemed to me worth doing.” Her own novels, *The Living* (1992) and *The Maytrees* (2007), each a brilliant performance, find different ways to eschew the contemporary. The first is a multigenerational saga, set in the late 19th century, about the earliest white settlements near Puget Sound, written, with remarkable fidelity and tact, in period idiom. But it isn’t really about history, either, in the sense of thinking that it matters, or seeing it in terms of some kind of development, or tracing its connections, if only implicitly, to the present. Like all her work, the novel is about the fact of being alive, for a brief span, within the overwhelming context of the natural world. *The Maytrees*, her most recent book—its prose a prodigy of velocity and precision, language concentrated to an essence—dissents in space instead of time, taking up a handful of Provincetown bohemians, a kind of spiritual elect, who devote themselves to art, simplicity, and contemplation out there on the Outer Cape. Dillard’s mind is on eternity; she couldn’t give a damn about the spirit of her time.

That, of course, is her prerogative (though the odor of self-congratulation starts to get a little thick in *The Maytrees*). But it points to several problems, and beyond them, to a fundamental limitation. For she is not content to walk her path in solitude. She also wants to tell us how to live. She has an ethic as well as a metaphysic, and it consists, in its entirety, of worship. “Quit your tents,” she preaches. “Pray without ceasing.” Dillard doesn’t seem to understand it’s not that simple, and I think it’s fair to note here not only that her family was rich, but that she married, in college, an established professional (and published, early, a perennial best seller). “It is noble work,” she says in reference to another pilgrim’s spiritual exercises, “and beats, from any angle, selling

shoes.” Except the part where you, you know, get to feed your family.

DILLARD IS NOT CONTENT to affirm her own way. She needs to denigrate all other ways (unlike Thoreau, who wrote, “I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for ... I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible”). The social novel isn’t simply not her thing; it’s not worth doing at all. The life in nature is good; the life of civilization, the life of cities, as she repeatedly insists (it is a major theme in *The Maytrees*), is obsessed with stuff and status, the cultivation and display of good taste. The judgment seems, to put it mildly, overbroad. It sounds not like all life in all cities (and Dillard, as far as I can tell, hasn’t lived in any cities since abandoning her native Pittsburgh after high school), but like the white-gloved milieu that she tells us about in *An*

This is a woman who has seen angels, who has seen visions.

American Childhood. Not to mention that the life of reading and writing to which she has devoted herself is inconceivable without civilization, and the cities where it’s principally created. Crayfish don’t write books, and copperheads don’t buy them.

But the problems go beyond hypocrisy and spiritual snobbery. Ordinarily, the thought that none of us matters in the larger scheme of things is followed by the corrective that, of course, we matter a great deal to one another, and need to take care of one another, and isn’t that what life is after all about? The word for this is *morality*, also known as love. But neither has much place in Dillard’s thought. *For the Time Being*, her last work of nonfiction, the book of seven parts and 10 rubrics, represents, among other things, a

long meditation over her decades of reading in the literature of spirit. Its hero is Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Catholic priest, paleontologist, and theologian. Second place goes to the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. But Teilhard and the Baal Shem, mystics though they were, had codes of conduct, codes of service, too, which came to them from their religions. Dillard seems, at least in this late work, to sense what she is missing. Every once in a while, she pulls a kind of quarter-back sneak, smuggling morality (“aiding and serving the afflicted and poor,” “a holy and compassionate intention”) into the discussion. The effect is of a man who finishes rebuilding the engine of his car and, finding a bolt on the driveway, balances it carefully on the hood. The bolt, in Dillard’s case, is the entire universe of human attachment.

Which brings us to her limitation. Dillard is a hedgehog masquerading as a fox. She seems to know many little things—those myriad natural phenomena that she is so magnificent at seeing and describing—but in fact she knows one big thing. She knows that we are born with souls but die in bodies. That is a very big thing. It is the biggest thing. She is the queen of the hedgehogs. But it is still only one thing.

And that, I think, may be the explanation for her movement into silence. Her works are each unique in formal terms, but there are only so many times, and so many ways, that you can make the same points. Already in her last two books, the only ones that she has written in more than 20 years, it feels as if, thematically at least, she is merely giving the old prayer wheel another spin. *The Abundance*, a collage of existing material, is, by definition, nothing new. One hopes it heralds a return. One fears it is a valedictory. **A**

William Deresiewicz is the author of Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life.

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Q:

Who is the greatest supporting player of all time?

Stacy Schiff, author, *The Witches: Salem, 1692*

God creates her merely to keep Adam company; he doesn't burden her with a name. Nor does he speak to her directly, which may have been a mistake. Really, **it's all about Eve**, who steals the show and reroutes history. She leaves us hungering for knowledge and thirsting for transgression. We owe her for art, drama, and literature—as well as clothes.



June Squibb, actress

Without **Tonto**, the Lone Ranger is just a guy in a mask.

Lenny Pickett, bandleader, *Saturday Night Live*

Anna Magdalena Bach, the second wife—and a copyist—of Johann Sebastian Bach. She transcribed much of her husband's music, while raising his children from his first marriage and the 13 they had together.

(She was also a gifted vocalist with her own singing career.)

Josh Charles, actor

In the span of just six years, before **John Cazale's** life was cut short at age 42, he co-starred in *The Godfather*, *The Godfather: Part II*, *The Conversation*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, and *The Deer Hunter*. All were nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture; three of them won. We never met, yet I miss him whenever I watch him.

Richard Norton Smith, historian and author

Without **Martha Washington's** love, fortune, management skills, and self-denying patriotism, the Father of His Country might have remained a minor member of the Virginia plantocracy. She ran Mount Vernon during his long absences; acted as his wartime secretary, sounding board, and surrogate; and charmed members of Congress who agreed on little else. Her discretion matched her hospitality: Because she burned most of her and George's personal correspondence, we'll never



know the extent of her supporting role.

Jonathan Banks, actor

Daffy Duck: the master of nuance. The reason I like him is he didn't hide the fact that he hated being Bugs Bunny's supporting player.



Alison Bechdel, cartoonist, *Fun Home* and *Dykes to Watch Out For*

Technically, **Eleanor Roosevelt** didn't so much support FDR as oppose him on many issues—urging him to push for integrating the armed services, and to prevent the internment of Japanese Americans, neither of which he did. But her behind-the-scenes progressivism had a deeply generative impact on American democracy and the course of the 20th century.

Lynn Nottage, playwright

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who stridently stood on the front line of the anti-apartheid movement,

became the public voice of resistance in South Africa, and got her hands dirty, only to fall prey to the ugliness of love and war.

Cleto Escobedo III, bandleader, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*


If you've ever listened to the radio, there's a great chance you've heard **the Wrecking Crew**, the studio band responsible for some of the greatest recordings ever. Starting in the early 1960s, they played behind Frank Sinatra, the Beach Boys, Cher, and Paul Simon, just to name a few.

READER RESPONSES

Scott Locke, Larchmont, N.Y.

Rosalind Franklin, who deciphered the X-rays that allowed Watson and Crick to figure out the structure of DNA.

Cody J. Reeder, Cincinnati, Ohio

In modern times, **Cardinal Richelieu's** support (and possible manipulation) of Louis XIII in remaking Europe is unparalleled. 

Want to see your name on this page? E-mail bigquestion@theatlantic.com with your response to the question for our May issue: **What is the greatest prank of all time?**



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